

Nightmare USA

The Untold Story of the
Exploitation Independents

Stephen Thrower



NIGHTMARE USA
THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE EXPLOITATION INDEPENDENTS

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO OSSIAN BROWN

IN MEMORY OF

Tom Barrett
Blaskar
Robert Burns
Don Dohler
Renee Harmon
John Peyser
Roger Watkins





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PYSCHOPATHIC KILLER ON THE LOOSE!

Have You Seen This Man?



ALBERT ROBERTSON, 21-year-old scion of prominent local family, today slashed the throat of an attendant and fled from private mental institution. With a psychopathic hatred of all women, he has been adjudged criminally insane and any knowledge of his whereabouts should be reported to police immediately.

BULLETIN

Albert Robertson, 21-year-old killer who escaped from a local mental hospital, eluded police and entered his mother's home in the Hollywood Hills here earlier today.

Two officers reported seeing a red sports car with a man and young girl pass them on the road minutes before they arrived to throw a protective cordon around the Robertson hillside mansion and grounds. It is now supposed that the psychopath entered a short time before, murdered the housekeeper before her young daughter returned from school, and then when the unsuspecting child arrived invited her to go for a ride, perhaps for an ice cream soda, for which she is known to have a fondness.

All servants had been ordered removed from the house when the murder began but it was later learned that the housekeeper had been on an errand and no one thought of the little girl at school.

Little Annie's mother was found dead in her bedroom, brutally slashed and nude. Coroner's report indicated she had not been raped. Fear for the child's life mounts and an all-out search is on for the pair.

Murdered Victim

A 43 year old attendant at a local mental hospital today was viciously slashed to death by Albert Robertson, an inmate who stole his car keys and fled.

It is reported that the victim showed indolent tendencies and frequently teased



the inmates which is given as one reason for his slaying.

Reconstruction of the tragedy indicates that he was lured to his death on the pretext of seeing smuggled stag films in the room of the criminally insane Robertson. The attendant was found seated in front of a small portable motion picture screen, slumped over dead while the film continued to unroll.

ESCAPES MENTAL HOSPITAL WOMEN IN AREA WARNED

LOS ANGELES, CA. — Southland women today were warned by police authorities to stay indoors at night, bolt all doors and windows, and report any suspicious strangers at once.

Albert Robertson, age 21, scion of the socially prominent Robertson family here, and heir to millions, today brutally murdered a male attendant at a local mental hospital where he has been a patient, stole the murdered man's car keys, and made good his escape. Earlier he was thwarted in an attempt to murder a nurse who had reprimanded him for an infringement of hospital regulations.

According to Dr. J. W. Burton, the psychiatrist in charge, the institution is more a rest home than an asylum and he had repeatedly warned the youth's mother that her son needed stronger security and more stringent treatment than his hospital was prepared to offer. Refusing to accept that the young man is insane, the wealthy matron insisted, "Poor Albert is only a little disturbed."

The escaped psychopath is reported as youthful, handsome, with affable personality and disarming manner and might easily pass for any normal, cultured young man. He is reported as having a deep hatred of women—particularly his mother—and refers to them as evil, degraded, not fit to live.

It is the belief of both the psychiatrist and the detective assigned to the case that Albert will try to seek out his mother at the palatial Hollywood Hills home in which he grew up and which she now occupies with a staff of servants. A special police cordon has been thrown around the house and grounds. Heavy security, of a type undisclosed to newsmen, is being given the killer's mother.

He has no hatred of men and murdered the attendant only to get his keys in the opinion of the police detective. The law enforcement officer warned TV and radio audiences and newspaper readers that they must take absolutely no chances. "The man," he says, "is criminally insane and will stop at nothing."

NEXT ON MADMAN'S LIST?

This sweet-faced, blue-eyed blonde child is 12 years of age, and in the company of psychopathic killer Albert Robertson, son of Mrs. Albert Robertson, prominent Southland socialite. The little girl is unaware that her companion has already murdered two people, one of them her own mother, who was the housekeeper in the beautiful Hollywood Hills home of Albert's mother.

In school when her mother was slain, the child must have arrived at the home minutes later and was unaware of the



ANNIE

tragedy. Said to be a good child who never dares, it is supposed that Annie must have been told that her mother had given permission for her to go for a ride with Albert.

It was later learned that large sums of money is missing from a safe in his mother's bedroom where Mrs. Robertson was known to keep it for possible emergencies. It is therefore believed that the killer has enough money to take the child and go far away should his disturbed mind turn along those lines.

For what concerns police and others even more is that some little trifle may tip the killer's mind in another direction and little Annie will become his next victim. It is hoped that his hatred of women does not include what he regards as "the innocent young" and that the child's life will be spared.

Anyone seeing the pair is urgently requested to contact the police with details.

Author's Preface

Nightmare USA has changed shape many times since I began writing it, in 2001. I first intended, naively as it turned out, to compile a comprehensive guide to every non-studio horror film made in America between 1970 and 1985, complete with supporting interview material. I made lists, I placed asterisks next to favourites, I planned an A-Z. I imagined the ultimate encyclopaedia: the freakiest decade of the freakiest genre, an American Film Necronomicon...

Of course, the list grew longer. And longer. It was easy to dismiss the studio pictures and the foreign co-productions – I even set a rule against the classics. After all, was there really anything else to say about *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*? Could the embers of Romero spit a few more sparks? Did *The Evil Dead* require a cheerleader? David Szulkin's book 'Wes Craven's Last House on the Left: The Making of a Cult Classic' left successive commentators with about as much hope as a victim of Weasel Padowski. So where to go for that sense of discovery?

I began by making telephone calls, writing letters and e-mails, note-taking, research, immersion in the minutiae, scouring through thirty years of documentation. I wanted a big, immersive project, and by God I'd found one. It had a beckoning, alluring quality, the promise of untrodden snow, unsullied greenery, the swamps and the deserts of horror, the nameless gas stations and wrong turnings and ghost towns.

What really took me by surprise, however, was the warmth and friendliness of the people with whom I made contact, and their willingness to discuss their work. Everyone I've spoken to has been tirelessly patient, tolerating a veritable locust-storm of questions spread over four or five years. Even those with whom I've enjoyed just a fleeting exchange of e-mails gave me frankness, thoughtfulness and wit.

Nightmare USA would have been so much easier to complete if my initial pessimism had been borne out. I naively imagined I would reach maybe four out of ten of my targets. Instead, the strike rate was closer to 90%. My list of 250 films, to be covered in equal depth, was merely mad ambition. I felt like the Borges character who tried to map reality at a ratio of 1:1. I had to concede defeat. A 'map' like *Nightmare USA* cannot be the territory.

For instance: *Don't Go in the Woods* was one of my 'must-cover' horror favourites. Director James Bryan was known almost solely for a critically reviled rural slasher film which I happened to love. Perfect! The chance to rally to a cause, to hold forth

at length about why everyone else was wrong... who could resist? I knew nothing about Bryan except that he'd made an obscure vigilante movie a couple of years later. However, after interviewing Jim, and seeing his earlier films (so obscure that back then they didn't even turn up on the Internet Movie Database), the idea that I might cover his career in 5,000 words was simply absurd. Frankly, one could write a book – a pertinent and detailed and far-reaching book – about this one director. The chapter that follows on James Bryan is twenty thousand words long, and I'm pretty sure you'll agree it's all meat and no fat. If one previously reviled video nasty could be the springboard for so much material, how the hell could I ever finish this book?

In the name of sanity and for the sake of your back muscles, dear reader, I've divided *Nightmare USA* into two halves (see the last page for details of Volume 2), and still it's just about half of what could be done. If the book you're now holding is less comprehensive than I set out to write, it's also more detailed, wider-ranging (and better, I think): even if it does trail a few loose threads. *Nightmare USA*, for all its size, is a beginning, not an end.

We'll be examining an era in which anything was possible, when the horror genre became unshackled by convention. The anticipation of success, though devoutly to be wished, was not a tourniquet to invention. Through a combination of eccentricity, amateur inspiration and wild guesswork, these films, by filmmakers I call 'the Exploitation Independents', achieve a strangeness and variety and imaginativeness to which Hollywood horror films rarely aspire. In the museum of film history, the Exploitation Independents are shades and hants and interlopers, tripping alarms and disappearing, too free to be boxed and evaluated by the mainstream of film criticism.

Why 1970-1985? Well even I'm not crazy enough to attempt 1930-2006 – although a bit of me feels guilty for not doing so. Essentially, the period I've chosen tallies with a trend in the movies I love, towards greater visceral extremes and a greater flexibility of form. Before 1970 there were only a few films that would match the extremes of the 1970s. And after 1985, the genre diminished and receded, renouncing its confrontational power under pressure from the majors and the MPAA. If there's a book to be written about indie horror after 1985, I look forward to reading it, not writing it.

Stephen Thrower, London, Spring 2007

opposite:
This pressbook for Paul Leder's *Poor Albert & Little Annie*, aka *I Dismember Mama* (1972), shows the extraordinary lengths to which film distributors would go to hype their wares; albeit with a few unfortunate doses of concentration (see the spelling of the headline).

below:
Small-ad art for James Bryan's shocking debut, *The Dirtiest Game in the World* (1970), raising a salute for the lost and forgotten exploitation films of America.





The Exploitation Independents

The 1970s were fertile years for American cinema. Directors like Bob Rafelson, Brian De Palma, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen were at the height of their powers, with movies such as *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *Sisters* (1973), *Nashville* (1975), *The Conversation* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Annie Hall* (1977) redefining American cinema. Low-budget horror films too were developing in a vivid parallel world: Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972), Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and George Romero's *Martin* (1976) were bold, idiosyncratic works by hugely talented directors, with energy, imagination, and a confrontational approach to their subject matter, while John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) were as polished, dynamic and technically innovative as anything the majors could offer.

And then there was the subterranean film industry, the exploitation arena, where some of the wildest and most shocking films imaginable proliferated, unchecked by censorship or the dictates of 'good taste'. Horror, an evergreen exploitation genre, enjoyed a surge in production, and as distributors strove to maintain their business edge against television and the major studios, the race was on to be more extreme, more shocking, more bizarre. Advances were also being made in film style: some of the strangest midnight blooms of the horror genre emerged in the 1970s, and the equally fertile soil of the early 1980s. A multitude of creative individuals took the opportunity offered by independent producers to explore their own obsessions, advance their personal vision, and make money. As long as the films were startling enough to support an exploitation hard sell, the filmmaker could expect the sort of writing, casting and directing freedom many a Hollywood director would sell his own grandmother to possess.

Before we get carried away, it is of course worth admitting that the exploitation industry of the 1970s also gave us some of the slowest, silliest, most hopelessly inept celluloid swarf ever to run through a projector. Some examples are humorous, others are just dull beyond belief: what matters is that *taken together*, both good and bad constitute an alternative, parallel cinema, where big money or the lack of it was no obstacle. Just as a sumptuous expensive film made by a talented director can sometimes

lank ignominiously, so too a cheap, threadbare movie made by an amateur can transcend its limitations, touching some part of us beyond the reach of the merely proficient. There are exploitation films of real class, and others of awesome ineptitude: nevertheless, even the latter can sometimes achieve a kind of insane apotheosis. Searching through the thousands of low-budget exploitation pictures made since the 1970s is compulsive for this very reason. Years after one has seen the major contenders, the *Texas Chain Saw Massacres* and *Halloween*s, one can still discover unexpected marvels, maybe whole films, like *Victims* (Daniel DiSomma, 1977), or *Death Bed* (George Barr, 1977); or maybe just amazing scenes or images, in movies largely unremarked-upon before. In the attics and cellars of American cinema, under its floorboards, behind the weighty furniture and between the layers of linoleum, strange cine-life forms still lurk, and if sometimes your passion for the obscure gives you the mien of a deranged entomologist, holding aloft a weird insect and trying to convince others of its beauty while they wrinkle their noses in distaste, well, that's obsession. It's not for everybody.

Shooting Don't Go in the Woods
A beautiful...
Rocky Mountain
Rank...
En...
A chilling and beau...
George Romero's...
Amer... Man



[illegible]

So, what exactly are exploitation films? Put simply they are independently made non-studio films produced either a) to exploit the financial possibilities of a popular genre, or b) to respond quickly to current interest in a particular topic. The term 'exploitation' thus refers primarily to the intention to 'exploit' audience interest in a topic (or, in mainstream terms, 'to meet demand'). In essence there is little difference here between the business practices of the exploitation film industry and the majors. The studios may have indulged the occasional star director with an offbeat personal project (Paramount allowing Hitchcock to make *Tornado* in 1958), or polished their artistic credibility by bankrolling a project by a visiting European art-house maestro (Antonioni, courted by MGM to make *Zabrenski Point* in 1970), but they generally wanted a ready audience for their output. Where exploitation filmmakers, producers and distributors differed was in their willingness to strip away all but the most essential elements from a package, hype the selling points with shameless hyperbole, and then produce as many variants as possible, quickly and cheaply, to maximise financial reward while audience demand was still fresh. Unlike Hollywood films, with their large crews, astronomical star wages, and temperamental directors, an exploitation film could be hurried from script to screen in just three or four months, with another on the way soon.

after. The results might lack the arts and graces of a *Hiz Society* (MGM, 1956) or a *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Paramount, 1961) but at their best they possessed a rude energy and vitality capable of upstaging major product. The word 'exploitation' is therefore merely a synonym for giving the people what they want – a time-honoured creed for business.¹ (p. 10, 89)

To some, the word 'exploitation' carries negative connotations, especially in the wake of feminism and its influence on film criticism. An 'exploitation film' can sound somehow sinister, as if the cast and crew are being exploited by immoral working practices, or worse. Given the exploitation industry's love of nudity and sexual extremes, the word inevitably echoes with concerns about the exploitation of women. This however is an ancillary connotation, and not part of the term's original meaning. Besides, women were at least as likely to experience exploitation on a Hollywood casting couch as in the smoky backroom of an independent film hustler. It's tempting to seek a different label, and exploitation's small business roots and *ad-hoc* distribution arrangements have often suggested the term 'independent' as an alternative. However, the word 'independent', or 'Indie' has already come to mean something quite different in the last fifteen years, referring instead to the work of mainstream auteurs like Steven Soderbergh and The Coen Brothers, so instead I will use the expanded term 'Exploitation Independents' to represent the filmmakers, producers and distributors covered here.

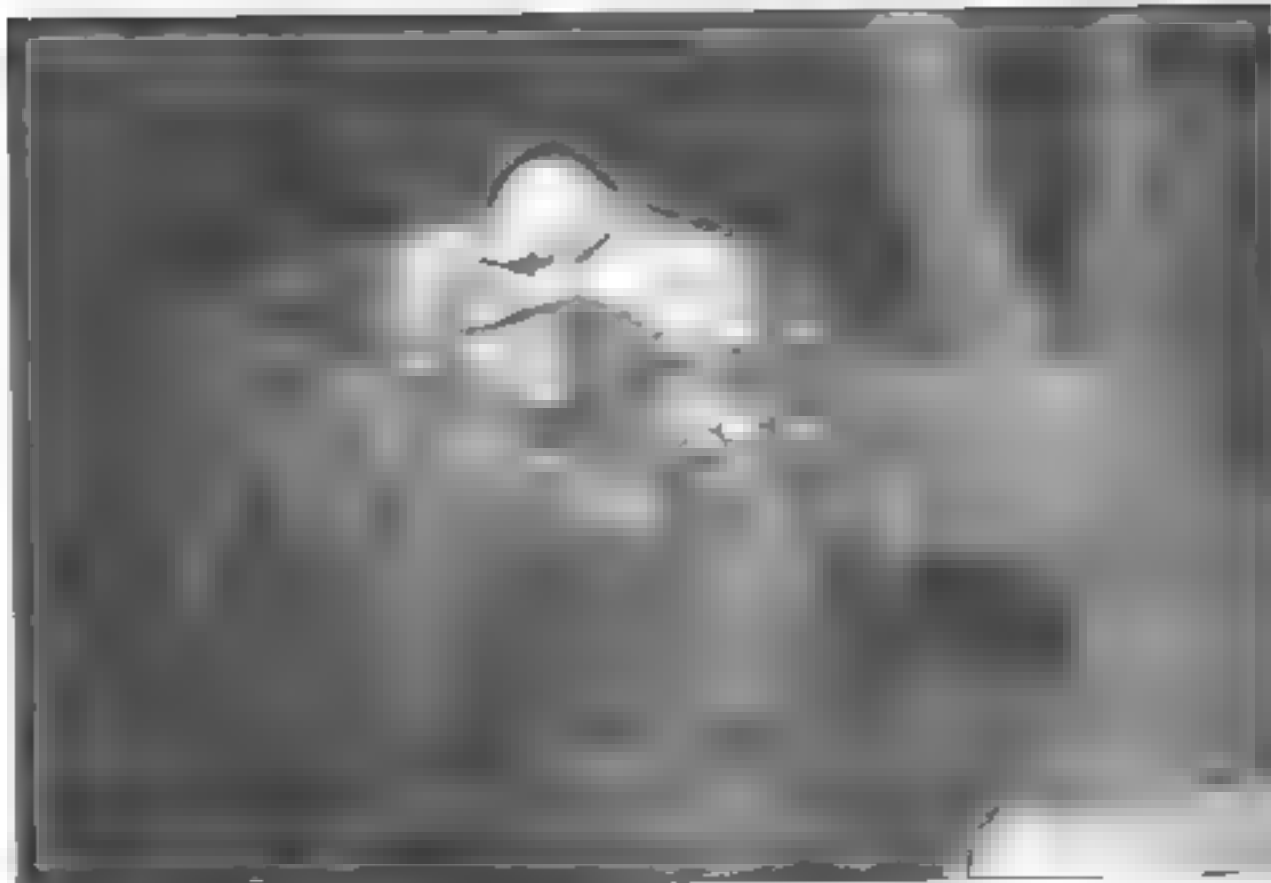
The 1970s saw a period of intense development in ambition and extremity of the exploitation film. Censorship was relaxed and the gate to excess thrown wide open. Massively popular in drive-ins and urban hardtops, exploitation movies – in particular the exploitation genre *par excellence*, horror – offered a vibrant and varied alternative to the mainstream of American cinema. Landmark titles like *The Headless Eyes* (Kent Bateman, 1971), *I Drink Your Blood* (David Hurston, 1971), *Straight Shooter* (Marc B. Ray, 1972) and *Hitch Hike To Hell* (Irv Berwick, 1977) were *exemplars* where a cross-country phenomenon, from Texas and Illinois to the grindhouses of New York and Los Angeles. Frequently offered to audiences in double or even triple bills, low-budget horror was at last in step with the hyperbole of the poster-writers: for decades, horror film ads had been promising *An Unbelievable Orgy of Terror* – and for decades audiences had been trooping off home after seeing the movie, passably entertained but somewhat unfulfilled. As exploitation entrepreneur David Friedman once put it, the early exploitation market offered viewers “the sizzle without the steak.” The person being exploited was the ‘mark’, the gullible audience member sucked in by “Coming Attractions” hinting at depravity: *too shocking to be described in this trailer!* It was only really in the 1960s and 1970s that exploitation films stopped teasing and delivered on those dangled promises. The technical aspects could be crude, to say the least, but when it came to the matter – the matter you frequently got it all – the sizzle *and* the steak.

Coming out of the horror genre from a different angle were movies that bred horror with something not unlike the stranger reaches of European art cinema. In this realm we encounter poetic chills like *Let's Scare Jessica To Death* (John Hancock, 1971), *Lemora: A Child's Tale of the Supernatural* (Richard Blackburn, 1973), *Messiah of Evil*

(Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz, 1973); *The Premonition* (Robert Allen Schnitzer, 1975); *The Witch Who Came from the Sea* (Matt Cimber, 1976), and *Friday the 13th: The Orphan* (John Badham, 1977) – films that take a dreamy impressionistic approach to the genre. Implicit in horror is the erosion of boundaries, be they physical, psychological, metaphysical, and this allows filmmakers a license unique in commercial genre cinema, to employ stylistic effects that would normally reside in avant-garde or ‘art cinema’ settings. In some cases, such as the extraordinary *Polanski’s Ghost* (Fredric Hobbs, 1973), these elapses and stylistic flourishes were employed deliberately; in others they resulted from lack of money, lack of conventional skill, or sheer natural waywardness. Some of the most beautiful, haunting movies like *Axe* (Frederek Friedel, 1974) or delicious nightmares like the under-rated *Death Trap* (Toke Hooper, 1976), a combination of accident and artistic ambition played a part. To the startled viewer though, it scarcely matters: the effect is frequently the same whether intentional or not. One can feel a powerful sense of alienation and disorientation oozing from the frankly insane *Frozen Screams* (Frank Roach and Renee Harmon, 1981) that rivals anything achieved by more self-conscious means. As the search for shocks morphs into weirdness as an end in itself, horror takes on a hallucinatory quality that leaves the viewer agape. *Matute’s Carnival of Blood* (Christopher Speeth, 1973) and *Boardinghouse* (John Wintergate, 1982) are among the most extraordinary examples, while *The Last House on Dead End Street* (Roger Watkins, 1977) goes furthest of all – combining mind-busting violence, drug-soaked debauch, and – to cap it all – genuine artistic self-awareness.

The USA boasts an incredible wealth of geographical and cultural variety – from the baking-hot alien landscapes of Death Valley to the sweltering marshlands of Louisiana, from the synthetic overload of Las Vegas to the old world elegance of New Orleans – and low-budget film productions sprung up in all manner of such unlikely locations giving us glimpses into small towns and rural corners previously ignored by the majors. The impetus for these regional productions varied: they could be the result of a local entrepreneur venturing to fulfil a life-long dream of filmmaking, or they could spring from thriving mini-studios dedicated to local production. The hot-spots for low-budget exploitation in the seventies and early eighties were situated chiefly New York and Los Angeles, but significant movie-makers emerged from Miami, Florida (Harry Kerwin, William Grefel); Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (George Romero, Christopher Speeth); Dallas, Texas (S.F. Brownrigg, Larry Buchanan); Texarkana, Texas (Charles B. Pierce); Shreveport, Louisiana (Joy Houck Jr., James Watson); New Orleans, Louisiana (Jack Weiss); Louisville, Kentucky (William Grefel); Okeechobee, Wisconsin (Bill Rebane); Baltimore, Maryland (Don Doherty, Tony Maunowski); and the North Carolina towns of Shelby (Earl Owensby, Worth Keeter) and Charlotte (Pat Patterson, Fredrik Friedel). As time went by some of these filmmakers headed off for California or New York to pursue their goals in the industry, others took one spin of the roulette wheel before retiring, fingers burned after being defrauded by distributors, or simply losing their shirt on a film that failed to appeal to an audience.

Such small film production was scattered widely across the United States, adding immensely to the richness of the American film. In Hollywood, film is planned, shaped



cultivated, harvested: it's a garden for the medium, with all the strict control that implies. Exploitation films are more like the uncultivated countryside of the American film landscape, where weeds and wild flowers alike grow more freely. The Exploitation Independents contributed something of real value to American cinema: choice variety, cultural plurality if you will. From the 1930s to the mid-1980s, low-budget exploitation pictures provided a vital alternative to the prestige productions of the majors. They made good money for cinema owners and drive-in chains, thrived in urban and rural locations alike, and responded rapidly to current youth trends and issues. Unlike the majors, who were always looking over their shoulders at the gossip mags or mainstream press, or worrying about the absurd demands of the Hays Code, exploitation moviemakers could budget away at the limits of what was legally allowed onscreen; and since most major newspapers and critics disdained to review them, much of what went on in the wider world of exploitation films passed by without nationwide howls of outrage (of the sort that eventually put paid to the horror genre's development in the early 1980s when the majors began taking an interest in the slasher film subgenre). An alternative history of American cinema can be mapped through a study of these ephemeral products, and as the modern American film industry regresses to the monolithic form of its early days, it's a breath of fresh air to experience the products of a freer, less mediated film environment. Although the claims to be made for individual exploitation pictures must not be overstated, their great value was in decentering the film industry, providing variance, aesthetic and topical, offering pleasures above and beyond the more conservative major products; and even suggesting to the viewer that the film towns, their friends and acquaintances, could partake in the dream-structure of America. They provided balance against the feeling that cultural power in cinema was located entirely in Hollywood – and encouraged optimism and engagement in the medium at a local level. For these reasons – as well as for the sheer pleasure of the films themselves – the Exploitation Independents are worthy of a detailed examination.

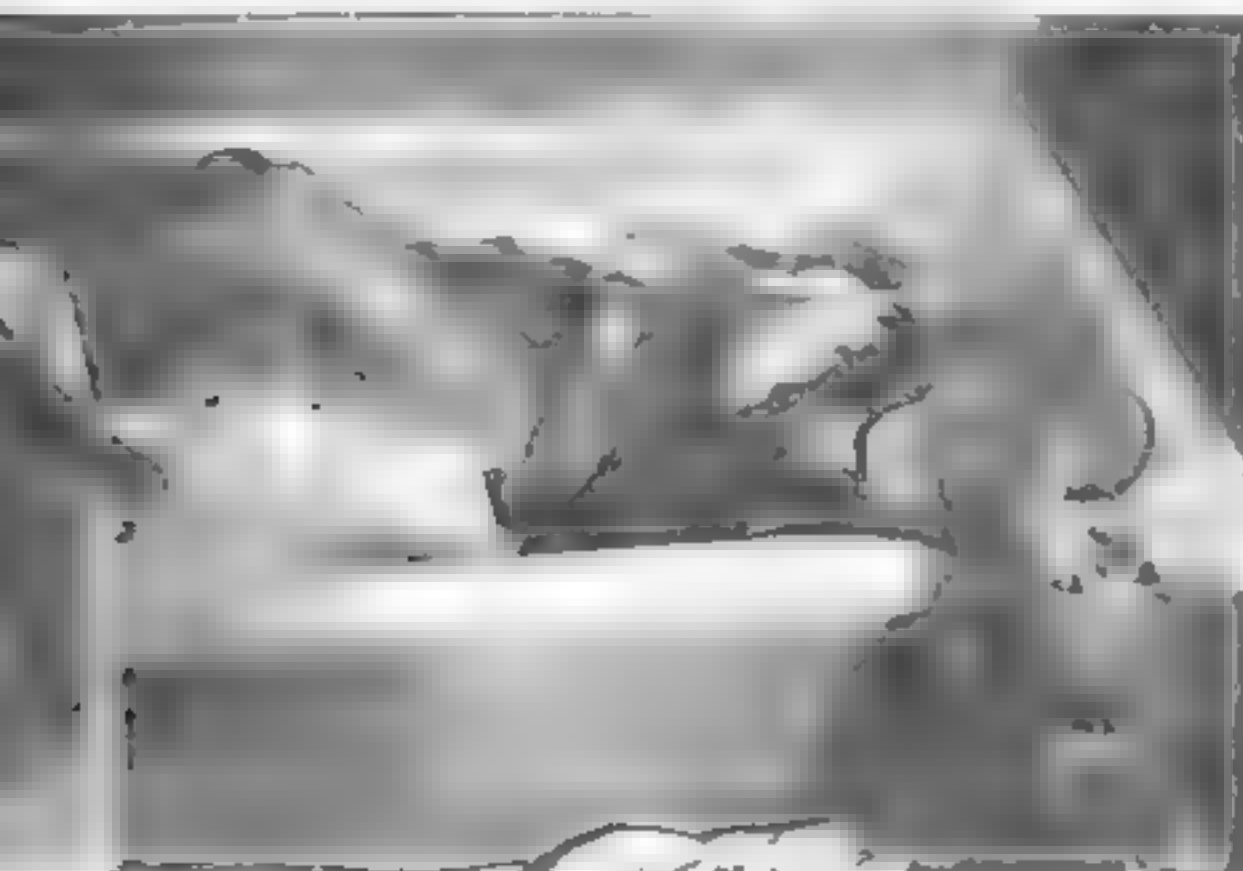
There's certainly something dozing from the victim in *Frozen Screams*

Roach and Renee Harmon axe murders and alienation are far from the only

or Italian nostalgia. Drink Your Blood

Crude but amusing promo artwork for Hooper's *Death Trap*, his wonderful follow-up to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*





The Roots of Exploitation, and The Godfather of Gore

The traditions of carnival or 'carny' trading were a key factor in the development of exploitation cinema. Influential producer-director David Friedman, for instance, was a huckster who brought to the movie business all the skills he'd learned in the roadshow trade. Of course, carnivals often promised you marvels, only to leave you with a deflated beachball, food poisoning, and a dead goldfish in a bag of tap-water. It's no surprise that horror films should have been one of the favourite products of the exploitation entrepreneurs: persuading an audience to queue up for the "shriekingest ghastliest thrill of your life" before offloading a dull Larry Buchanan film was not unlike shoving you into a lawdery tunnel of fake bats and cardboard witches masquerading as a ghost train ride.

But, even in the early days, exploitation films occasionally delivered, just as the sideshows occasionally featured a real, two-headed calf, or a genuine human oddity strange enough to send you home unsettled and subdued. In the 1940s it was the unscrupulous producer/distributor Kruger Babb who, with director William Beaudine, first delivered a movie that really did startle the audience. The otherwise innocuous educational film *Mom and Dad* (1945) featured footage shot at a real human birth, triggering stunned reactions all the more powerful for having been preceded by the expectation of erotica. The film was marketed to suggest that here was the chance to see a woman expose herself to scrutiny of the most intimate kind – only to deliver the distended vaginal contortions, rupturing membranes and escaping fluids of the birth process.

Babb was a major influence on the wily Friedman, who worked with him for a while and realised that it was possible to make a profit by showing just a little of what people wanted. As he said, "The whole secret to exploitation and our successful little racket was the carnival tease. Boy, we didn't see it this week, but next week they're really going to show it to us."¹ But it was when a man called Herschell Gordon Lewis entered the picture that Friedman's place in exploitation film legend was assured.

Lewis first came to Friedman's attention in 1960 when he marched into the Chicago office of Modern Film Distributors, Friedman's company, and said he needed money to make his first feature. Friedman and Lewis got to talking and discovered they were very much of a mind about the industry. Their first collaboration was as producers of *The Prime Time* (1960), a roady titillating romp directed by Gordon Weisenborn, which offered fleeting glimpses of female flesh to ape the 'nude-cutie' style of Russ Meyer's *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959). The nude cuties were tame fare, offering mere tinges of toplessness and glimpses of quivering bottoms, padded out with light unsophisticated comedy. Lewis immediately upped the stakes by directing *Living Venus* (1961), a slightly more risqué nude-cutie than Weisenborn's film, following it with a sex comedy, *The Adventures of Luck Pierre* (1961), and a string of nudist films, including *Daughter of the Sun* (1962), *Nature's Playmates* (1962), and a parody of the nude industry called *Born-n-g* (1963).

With qualifications for teaching High School English, Lewis was a smart, ambitious guy: smart enough to know that if he was going to advance beyond the limits of the nudies he had to do something that would stop the audience in their tracks. In an increasingly crowded market he needed something new to set his work apart from both major studios and other exploitation purveyors. Despite moderate financial success peddling smut, Lewis was growing restless with the rather dull material and looking for alternatives. Fully explicit sex was still a complete no-no, so it had to be something else.

That something was gore. It occurred to Lewis and Friedman that although violence and death were staples of the cinema, no one ever showed the grisly details – instead the camera always flinched, the picture always faded to black. There was a taboo against showing the torn, mangled and twisted flesh of bleeding screaming victims. As soon as this taboo was remarked upon, the two men set about violating it.

Lewis directed his first gore film, *Blood Feast*, in 1963 and from the very start he knew he was onto a winner. "We opened the film at a drive-in in Peoria, feeling that if we dropped dead in Peoria no one would know. The film opened on a Friday-Saturday we couldn't stand it any longer, and we drove down to Peoria. Even though there was a major fair in town, theater traffic was backed up so far the State Police were directing it. We were still about a quarter mile from the theater when I turned to Dave, held out my hand, and said, 'I guess we've started something.'"²

If there's a fertile, zinging moment in the Cinema of Bad Taste, it's *Blood Feast*. Made for \$74,000, it transcended its niche to become a runaway drive-in hit of the early sixties. Its importance to the horror genre in particular cannot be over-estimated. *Blood Feast* was the first horror film not only to shock its viewers, but also to wilfully revolt them. When it comes to Bad Taste, H.G. Lewis is the Daddy, to whom even John Waters genuflects. Not all of the films covered here in *Nightmare USA* embrace Lewis's liberating vulgarity, but there's no doubt that the modern horror film owes a chromosome to this man, one that can be seen today in the bloodline of everything from *Friday the 13th* (1980) to *Hostel* (2006).

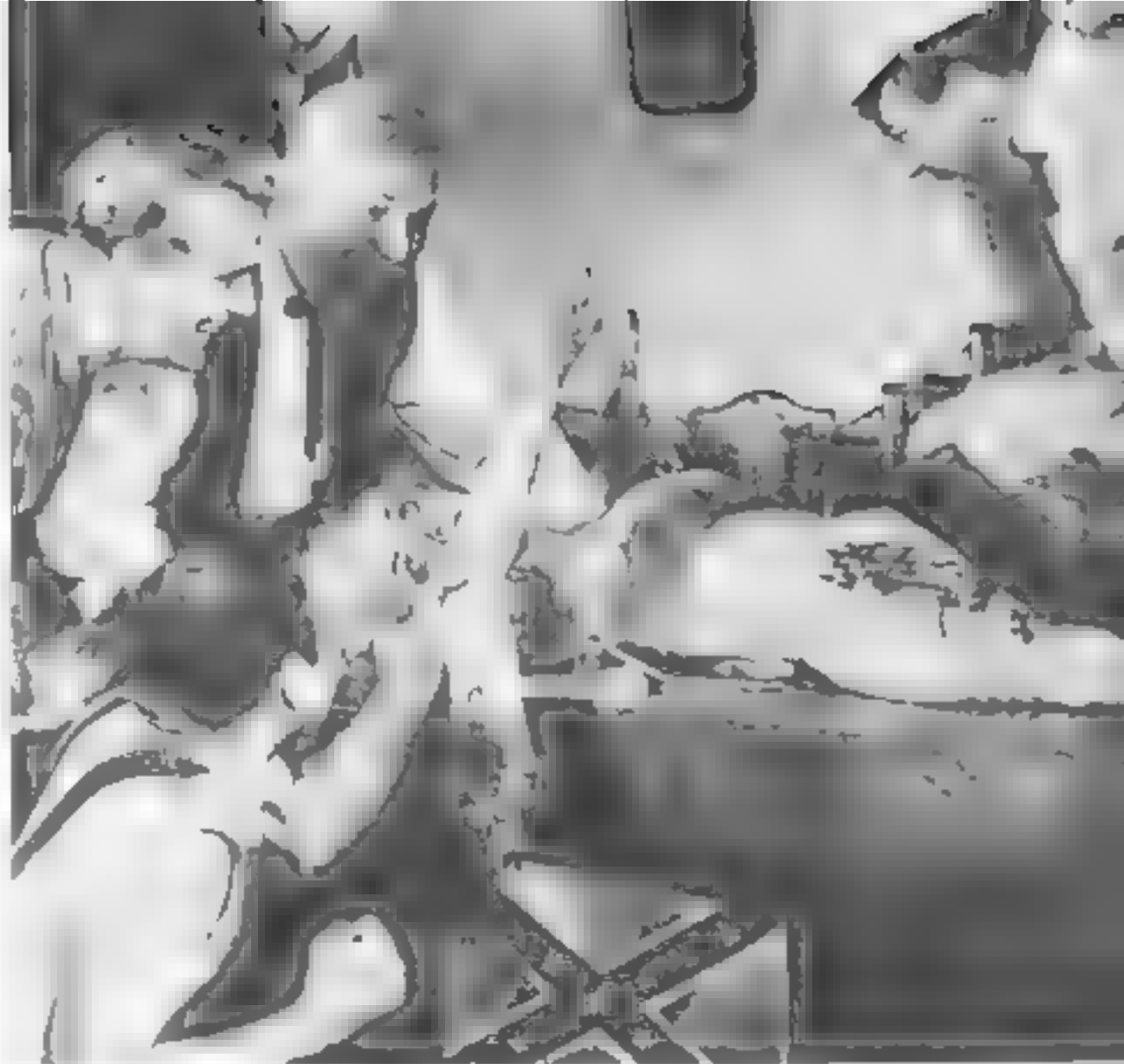
Blood Feast is so crude and simplistic that it can seem positively avant-garde today, with its wonky music and bold primary colour backgrounds lit so flatly you'd think a comic-strip page was pressing itself on the lens. Blocky

st and editing patterns thwart the usual flow of visual information, and close-ups are so startlingly graceless it's worth coining a new technical term to prevent Gloria Swanson spinning in her grave. Gruesome murders are presented with blunt defiance, or the obstreperous relish of a child showing a mouthful of chewed-up food. This is where the film really lives, and it's the feeling of gleeful pathological lechishness that amuses or offends, as much as the gore itself. Lewis treated audiences to the sight of a woman's tongue (a foot-long mass of cranberry coloured ectoplasm) being ripped from her mouth, and another cut man has her leg cut off at the knee. The *pièce de résistance*, a tabletop evisceration, achieves a *Grand Guignol* tableau that's simultaneously repulsive and astounding. Certainly audiences in 1963 had seen nothing remotely like it before. "Disgusting?" Of course. "Misogynous?" Debatable. There's hilarity in all this butcher-shop mayhem, and to be forgiven is to play straight man to Lewis's wind-up. *Blood Feast*'s exuberant eruptions of gore are as funny as they are disgusting, like something from a cheap-and-nasty carnival act, and the film's villain, caterer Fuad Ramses, is as bizarrely emphatic as a circus clown. Let go of the need to disapprove, and the score for horn and kettledrums alone is frequently foreboding if it can only raise a smile.

Despite all these things, *Blood Feast* is more than just a cluster of 'bad film' signifiers. It has power because of, not despite, its amateur elements. There's no need to coddle Lewis, as some movie buffs do Edward D. Wood – *Blood Feast* does not cry out for the pity of an indulgent audience. Lewis will never need some future Tim Burton to cheerlead his *neurve*. Implicit in *Blood Feast*, and explicit in Lewis's later films, is a feeling that we're being played, like fish by an angler, that the filmmaker is having a laugh at the expense of anyone unprepared for his butcher-shop theatrics.

Lewis followed *Blood Feast* with another violent saga, *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964). From its hyperbolic title onwards we're tipped off to the presence of a showman. *Two Thousand Maniacs!* was one of Lewis's most plausible misfires, with fair acting and a story of some originality (the musical *Brigadoon* excepted) to bolster the bouts of violence. The gore wasn't quite as disgusting as that of *Blood Feast*, but still it must have sent many a wobbly-kneed drive-in patron out of his car to "call Raph!" (like the film's first eruption of mayhem, during a countryside frost, a grinning hick suddenly severs a city girl's thumb before dragging her screaming back into town for dismemberment by a gloating cadre of good ole boys). The scene has impact, not only for what you see (the dumb slicing, and a girl's limbs hacked off by an axe) but because of the sheer unscreen duration – the horror is drawn out, with the victim transferred from one location to another for further abuse. Amid the carnage, the gleeful performances of the killers add a tinge of aggressive absurdity. Audiences accustomed to short bursts of implied violence were having their faces rubbed in something quite different.

The energy dimmed somewhat for the third in Lewis's 'Gore Trilogy', *Color Me Blood Red* (1965), a film that shows the beginnings of artistic self-consciousness in the depiction of a painter who discovers that the perfect shade of red needed for his work is human blood. But after splitting from producer David Friedman and directing a few non-horror items, Lewis bounced back with even grasher films: chiefly *The Gruesome Twosome* (1967), *The Sword of Gore* (1970) and *The Gore Gore Girls* (1972). As

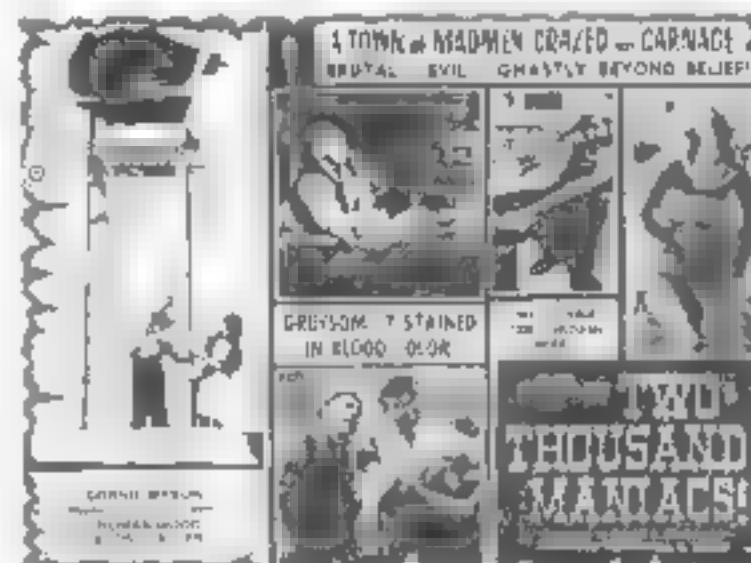


the titles suggest, they bring a rough, satirical humour to the table, along with even more of the red stuff. *The Gruesome Twosome* sees the start of Lewis's decadent period – don't laugh! – as the set-up is relentlessly satirized and no one behind or in front of the camera takes the horror seriously. That said, the visceral shocks are as potent as ever. Quite what an unsuspecting '60s audience made of these semi-consciously gross and unconvincing scap-epic charades is anyone's guess. The killer is a poorly acted retard cooed over by his equally deranged mother, and the breadbare plotting is sarcastically endowed with several minutes of blatant padding, as in the opening scene (added to bring the running time up to spec*) in which two Styrofoam heads swap small talk in the window of a downtown wig shop.

The Word of Gore is simultaneously the strangest and the slowest of Lewis's movies, jaw-droppingly ghastly, bizarrely inventive, but infuriatingly repetitious. Teasing the

A visiting Yankee 'Shelby' dwings that being 'guest of honour' in a Continental celebration isn't all it's cracked to be in *Two Thousand Maniacs!* Lewis's re-appearances in *Blood Feast*

Plot
Two Thousand Maniacs!



The movie that started it all: *Blood Feast*

Original US
Fuad Ramses: Mai Amokdi, a woman before adding
Epitaph
More ingredients, as Fuad prepares for a Playboy centerfold (well, not heroine Connie Mason, anyway) pieces of Sandra S

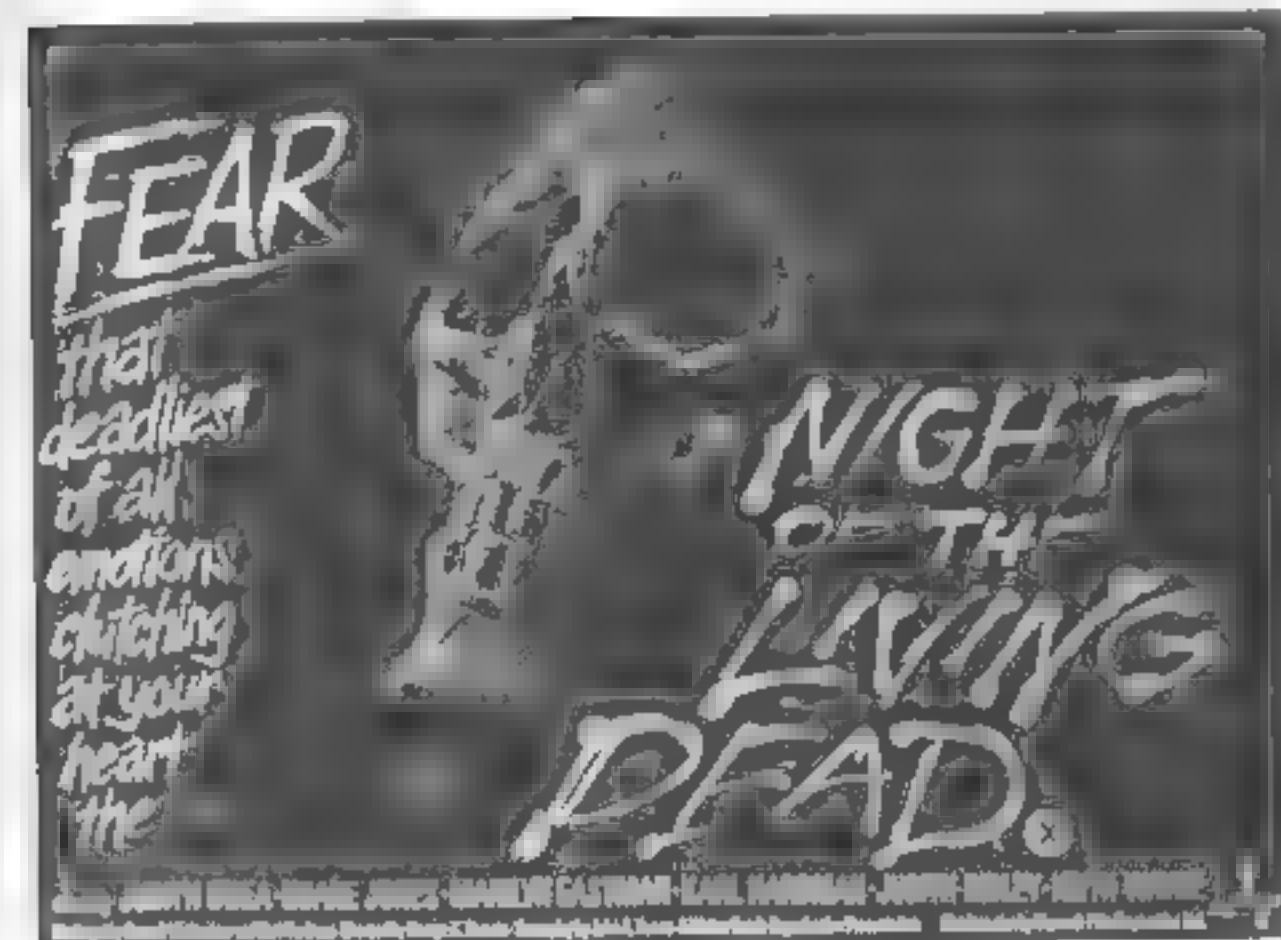


Color
The breathless look of
the original
the original



story of a dreamer's life may seem whose crises are not
turn to reality after the show is over. It establishes a high
watermark for exploitation film weirdness that would not
be challenged until Doris Wishman hitbed *4 Years of
Dismember* in 1983. Lewis constructs an ambitious, albeit
'Fusion versus Reality' the ideas are nugacious, although
his narrative skills are, if anything, more regressive and
painfully amateur than ever. Nevertheless, since he does
depicts reality as contradictory and mutational, and since
the principle of cause-and-effect is deconstructed or
flagrantly violated, author and Lewis expert John Krut
was right to suggest, however facetiously, a kinship
between Wizard and the work of Sheridan novelists and
animator Luigi Picandello! Finally, *The Gore Gore Girls*
despite its sex-on't plays like a macabre comedy, with
Lewis stopping on perhaps the most extreme, extraordinary
violence of his career. Indeed, the man himself felt that
he'd done as much as he could with *The Gore Gore Girls*
which earned an 'X' certificate in March 1968, a
distinction at the time for a two-part movie. Lewis did
not return to directing until tempted by cash to make the
sequel, *The Gore Gore Girls 2*, in 1970.

Night of the Living Dead - original UK
The breathless look of
the original



Romero, and the Modern Horror Pantheon

As time goes by and film-makers with their
cheats, claims and the power of the
discovery of the horror genre in America
began in 1968 with George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. In truth it was Hersche Gordon Lewis
progenitor of graphic American horror, but what he
added was exceptional filmmaking skill, a sense
of a new form, and genuine originality. Lewis, as interviews have shown, is a realist, and
his films are not the best vehicles to make a
astonishing debut has been analysed, rejected, re-
heated, distorted, rediscovered, colonized, re-
made and re-released until it's almost impossible
regain a sense of what really changed when we were
initially exposed to it. What is worth saying is
that Romero brought a new urgency to the genre.
Something changed when his zombies became
into film history, something that left even the
sadism of H.G. Lewis behind.

Night of the Living Dead is without doubt a
point, a class act emerging from what was then
just a simple Pennsylvania business enterprise. What
was initially condemned, mocked, sneered at and
for all manner of negative effects on its poor audience
now well-established position of respect can be even
obscuring than the fury of those early attacks. One of the
first things you have to do is to stop thinking of it as
perfect. It has a significant degree of
reputation as the film that brought the horror
genre. It's almost as talky as that other great
and white monster movie, *Fright Without a Face*.
Fright only springs to life for its hokey but exciting
Night of the Living Dead kicks off as a true
back into doing a heavy stodge in the middle there
for the audience that is a bit of a

Romero's debut brought a chilling seediness to
genre a shabbiness of cast and mise-en-scene. As for the
monsters, there was a grubby blue-collar apocalypse
romanticism, the stotum and stotum of the day.
he was even at the end, there was a lack of a
terribly plausible gruesomeness. The zombies were
horrible because they wanted to eat you - it was the
they embodied an irredeemable abjection as they
these pathetic mangled figures weren't the snarling
of folklore, werewolves or vampires red in tooth and
with the gleam of a savage vital in their eye. For
over scraps of human flesh, they possessed none
were going to be the wild. You find yourself
feeling something of the same as when these grotesque
disseminate the stotum of the day, underwear, stotum
around on a chilly November night, puffy and plump
bedraggled. Their actions are not the expression of
revolutionary aggression just a sad, stress compulsion.
The performers, non-actors conscripted from the local
community - shopkeepers, businessmen, housewives
like the unchosen hordes who fail auditions for talent
shows, traing around in their 'model's own' costumes.
Romero gave us an invasion of the quotidian: we were
ghosts, you and our families, our neighbours. A
no more change. We were the monsters in the
face of a world that was a nightmarish form of
advertising the fact that some more less
compulsion, as if we'd turned on the hallway light

a favourite but now gentle Aunt on the kitchen floor, eating cat food in her nightie, eyes glazed and confused. Horner was mixed with a confusing pathos.

Then there was Barbara, whose failure to adjust to the film's nightmarish reality marked a defining shift from the sophisticated heroines or spirited screamers of Lewton and Hammer. The dismaying honesty of her characterisation said, "Who are you kidding? What makes you think you'd cope with this level of horror?" The screams and swoons of universal Hammer heroines were replaced by the most men got to hearing the female orgasm onscreen before the days of sexual liberation. Barbara isn't part of the film's not really so terrifying. It's scary and all-too-beleivable. As survivor of the first zombie attack, she becomes audience surrogate for the first reel, pulling us deeper into the story as she runs across open countryside in an attempt to fetch help at a decrepit old farmhouse. This journey is then challenged by her collapse into disorientation. Some viewers can't take this turn of events. "Put her back in the corner you silly bitch" is not an unusual audience response. Romero shows how we hate to believe that events might be 'too much' for us. Barbara's collapse into near-madness, her pathetic clinging to the fringes of normality (clinging with a piece of fabric etc.), even her belated return to the group by ineptly barricading the door, offend the audience's wish to experience a sense of control. For me, the ironic finale in which Barbara falls into the clutches of her undead brother just as she's begun to fight

is a perfect ending. Romero himself said that things were not going to turn out alright. The hero was not in control of events. Love did not have a right to live. Love didn't conquer the family was not a sanctuary. Even the monsters weren't evil, so there was no consoling moral dimension. That wasn't Communism or Fascism. It was too close, too defined as an 'other' of some sort. Instead of an enemy in the clear and righteous sense, a depersonalised, faceless enemy roamed the Earth in a sort of reproachful manner. As such, the film presents an irresistible work of entertainment for critics and theorists. American cultural upheavals of the sixties, such as the Kent State anti-war demonstrations, the Kennedy assassination and the Civil Rights movement, have all been cited as catalysts for Romero's film. Frankly, connections can indeed be made, but beware. In our desire to make grand narratives of history and culture, we can often accept high-minded

theories. Romero himself has been cautious on this point. "It was sort of conscious of the fact that we were doing a horror film, and we weren't adverse [sic] to shattering conventions, and we wanted to give our film everything we could to attract attention." Beyond conventions and the etiquette of screen horror, though, is more guarded. "It was 1968, man. Everybody was saying, 'Maybe it crept in. I was just making a film, and I think the anger and the attitude and all there is just there because it was 1968.' I think that's what's so important about it, and true to people, it's not possible for them to have the little kinds of emotions and feelings and rationales that they call 'hidden' or 'subliminal' statements and whatever." It means that a certain age may share a social consciousness that dovetails with theories seeing modern history as the product of the political upheavals of the 1960s. But the films have made sense to viewers all over the world,



regardless of social context, which would suggest that something broader and deeper is at play. The social-response thesis (as expanded upon in 2000 by Adam Simon's documentary *The American Nightmare*) snacks of a middle-aged grasp for respectability by those uncomfortable with the historic sadistic, masochistic and sensuomaniacal qualities of the genre. British audiences didn't respond to *Night of the Living Dead* because their sons were coming home from a war in body bags. Nor did they feel stirred by *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in the mid-seventies because of sympathetic twinges of anxiety about the US fuel crisis or the mechanisation of agriculture. Audiences worldwide react to the syntax and rhythm of these movies: their kinetic and auditory power, their grasp of nightmare logic and the embodiment of primal fears about bad places and bad people. You no more need politics and social context to 'read' them than a lover of Grimm's fairytales needs to bore up on 19th Century German forestry practices.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre
Spanish: La matanza de Texas
authentic movie watching

Critical Responses to Exploitation Cinema

For a long time, critical opinion in the 1970s would have insisted that horror films, "mere exploitation" were certainly *not* to be ranked alongside the mavericks and masters of the New Wave. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a powerful political work (the *Dead*, which, unlike *Night of the Living Dead*, has a conscious, deliberate and deeply pessimistic political dimension) was just as likely to be dismissed as revolting garbage as it was to be admired for its bleak social satire and self-consciously cartoonish spectacle. *Exploitation cinema* has changed the way in which it is seen, however. As a result of two factors: changing social views of racism, violence and (perhaps more tellingly) the subsequent mainstream careers of the filmmakers concerned – many of the most high profile Exploitation Independents are now safely enshrined in a critical film discourse that recognises the value of their work as texts.

It is uncontroversial to suggest that styles and tastes change over time: the horror genre, alongside comedy, has long been a good barometer for mapping the way in which social taboos and boundaries shift, dissolve and reform. But what does it mean to suggest that the subsequent career of a filmmaker plays a part in redefining attitudes to their earlier output? The answer lies in the auteur theory, a commonly adopted theoretical viewpoint in which privilege is given to the perceived author of a work, usually the director.

There is much to be said for the auteur approach. Prominent voices in the horror genre such as George Romero or David Cronenberg are writer-directors, justly celebrated for their authorial signature, their "auteur consistency". But, there is a drawback: before such value judgements can be made, the auteur theory requires multiple films by the same director – preferably more than two – as a sanction for serious consideration, and a safeguard against the ultimate critical crime: *reading too much* into a single film. The auteurist approach, with its concern for *sustained* artistic signatures, has obvious deficiencies when assessing "one-off" films made by

unknown directors. Few theorists even now would admit individual exploitation films into serious consideration *without* the imprimatur of previous critical recognition. Such films have generally been disregarded in overviews of American cinema because they make risky subjects for learned theses. If lightning can be shown to have struck twice, theorists feel they can safely start looking for the "hand of God" – i.e. the auteur.

Specialist or fan publications have more diligently scrutinised the exploitation arena, and admittedly, in the last five or six years, an increasing number of academic writers address it too, but to illustrate the blind-spot in wider film discourse it is worth looking briefly at two books which act as bridging points for film students entering academic study: *The Cinema Book*, by Pam Cook and Mike Barnink, and *Film Art*, by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Although admirably wide-ranging in almost every other respect, neither volume grants exploitation due credit as a distinct cinematic force: indeed, the category is barely acknowledged. In *The Cinema Book*, a chapter called "Alternatives to Classic Hollywood" lists the following: "Early Cinema after Brighton", "New Hollywood", "Art Cinema", "East Asian Cinema", "Avant-Garde and Counter-Cinema", "Third World and Postcolonial Cinema", and "Hindi Cinema". In *Film Art*, exploitation movies are referred to in just three paragraphs (in a book of over five hundred pages): by comparison, Experimental Film (another form in which individual effort is spread widely over the whole USA) receives scrutiny over seventeen pages. Considering cultural reach alone, the imbalance is regrettable.

The oversight is almost certainly due to a combination of factors: the perceived lowbrow nature of exploitation, its enigmatical, decentralized nature (lots of one-off films, with many different writers and directors), and its reliance on genre. When general film reference works dip into exploitation cinema it is nearly always to mention Sam Arkoff's American International Pictures (AIP) or Roger Corman Productions, two solid mini-major set-ups whose exploitation movies account for just a fraction of those produced. Corman and AIP have also been reasonably well documented because several alumni of the two (such as Coppola and Scorsese) went on to mainstream careers, thus drawing attention to the seed-bed from which they grew. Corman's own career as director of such classic films as *The Marquise of the Red Death* and *The Touch of Evil* (no doubt helped as well.) Sometimes an iconic figure from the margins of exploitation, a David Cronenberg or a Wes Craven, is raised on the shoulders of critical recognition especially if their work fits neatly with the fashionable trends of the day. Suddenly the crust metamorphoses from exploitation pariah to maverick hero, which is fine, except that their films are then admitted to a "charmed circle" of critical celebration at the expense of legions of others ignored at the periphery. It's not the purpose of this book to dismiss the value of established auteurs. I just believe that critics should extend to interesting strangers the same courtesy they offer familiar faces. And besides, the "charmed circle" of critical acceptance is itself a problem: it can become a petrified forest in which vital life is frozen mid-step. Such is the fate of the Italian director Dario Argento, a true maverick of the horror genre whose work became mired in sterile self-consciousness sometime in the early 1990s: suspiciously enough, *after* he became the subject of serious study.



Drive-In Massacres

with thanks to Robert Minter

From the thirties to the eighties, a parallel network of film production and exhibition flourished in the USA. Thousands of low-budget genre movies were made, and central to their success was a uniquely American phenomenon: the drive-in movie theatre.

A drive-in is basically an open-air cinema, comprising a large white surface upon which a movie can be projected (anything from a whitewashed wall to a specially constructed high-tension canvas); a projection booth; a large car-parking area; and (last but not least, a concession stand for the sale of snacks. The first drive-in was patented in 1933 by Richard M. Hollingshead Jr., the son of a chemical company magnate. Feeling unchallenged by his post in the family business, Hollingshead came up with the drive-in after noting two problems with existing cinemas: if parents with young children wanted to go to a movie, they had to find a babysitter in the evenings, and since most theatres of the day were on main streets without parking lots, finding a parking space was a major headache. Having on the idea of outdoor screenings to be viewed from the family car, he set up a prototype on his own land, using a screen nailed to trees in his garden and cars arranged in the driveway. After experimenting with different options to achieve optimum audio and visual range, Hollingshead obtained a patent and set up the world's first drive-in theatre in Camden, New Jersey, opening on 6 June, 1933. The idea was a big success, and soon others were springing up elsewhere.

The early drive-ins relied on a single audio source, usually a three-way speaker mounted near the screen. But there were two drawbacks to this approach: firstly, since sound travels more slowly than light, the cars furthest away from the screen would hear the sound lag behind the image; and secondly, although drive-in sites were often out of town, the speakers would broadcast the movie across fields to adjacent properties, making them unpopular with local residents. The problem was solved when in-car speaker systems were introduced: patrons were offered portable speakers attached to posts beside each parking space, to be inserted through the side window and propped on the dashboard. (Later technological advances led to the sound being transmitted to the car radio at low-radius output on the AM or FM band, enabling stereo in place of

exploitation films like *Death Race 2000* (1975) and videogames like *Carnageddon* – the car is clearly the central icon of American success. Drive-ins brought the automobile and the silver screen together, then added yet another potent energy to the mix: teenage sex.

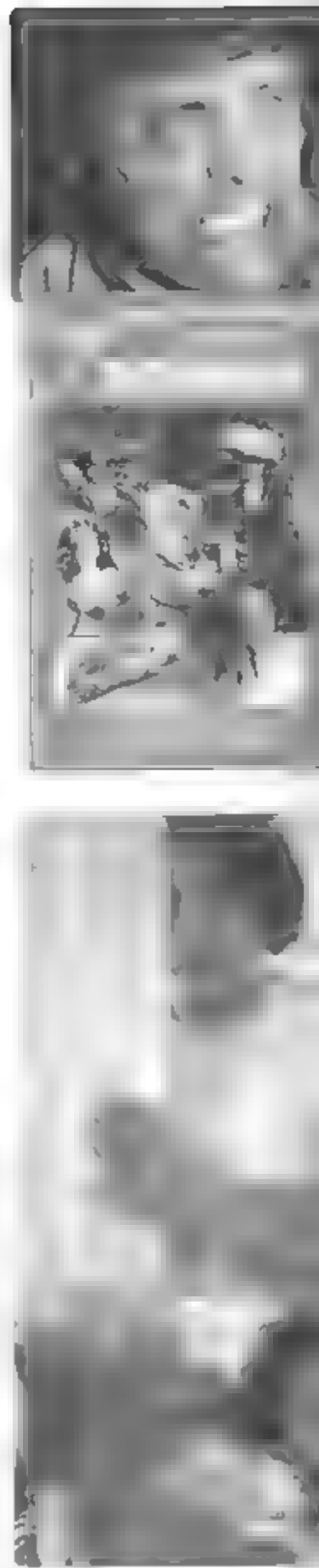
While the inventor of the drive-in may have been thinking of hard-worked parents struggling to find babysitters and parking spaces, it wasn't long before teenagers discovered another advantage to his brainchild. Drive-ins, of course, made perfect venues for dating. Of necessity, they operated after twilight, and the mixture of semi-privacy and safety they offered horny teenage lovers led to disapproving press articles damning drive-ins as 'passion-pits'. Adding to the appeal of sitting in the backseat at the movies – by cocooning young couples in their automobiles – the drive-in gave baby-boomers the ideal location for intimacy. What moralizers failed to see was that for girls it was probably better to make out in a car surrounded by lots of other cars, all perhaps similarly occupied, and bathed in the intermittent flare of the movie screen, rather than acceding to a drive down some lonely Lover's Lane.

Meanwhile, horror offered reliable frights, driving couples together in a ritual of shock-embrace-and-fondle that has long been self-consciously recorded by the genre itself. Seventies horrors that feature key scenes at the drive-in include *Deathdream* (Bob Clark, 1972), *Kiss of the Torture* (Chris Manger, 1975), and, you guessed it, *Drive-In Massacre* (Stu Segall, 1976). In each case, the films spring horrific backseat surprises – a zombie killer, spiders, a psycho-killer – on the requisite necking couples. Perhaps the most potent use of the drive-in as an icon in its own right came in *Targets* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1968), in which a teenage sniper takes pot-shots at drive-in patrons during a screening in honour of a soon-to-retire horror icon (Boris Karloff). The film suggested that the old Gothic horror films of the 1930s and 40s (and the Corman Gothics of the early 1960s, had been rendered obsolete by the horror of real-life random violence (the film was inspired by the Charles Whitman 'Texas Tower Sniper' killings of 1966). This slightly smug formulation was itself rendered obsolete when the horror genre took up the challenge of addressing real-world horror, in such uncompromising films as *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) and *Murder* (1980) (movies Bogdanovich is unlikely to admire).

You never knew quite what to expect at the drive-in. For sure, the posters and adverts designed by the distributors declared that you were in for the shock of your life, but all sorts of other forces were at work too, and they differed from territory to territory, chain to chain. Drive-in owners wilfully changed the titles of the films they were showing, crudely inserting new title cards, drawn with magic marker if necessary. A manager might order the projectionist to edit a film, particularly if the screen faced a street where people pulled onto the Interstate. After all, a grisly shocker like *I Drink Your Blood* could cause accidents if some hapless traveller caught a glimpse of, say, a deranged happy chick louting a severed limb. Films were also butchered as successive managers and projectionists snipped out favourite violent or sexy moments for their own collections. And while the producers and distributors edited different versions for different regional drive-ins (a film that played well in the

merica, rising to over 4,000 by 1958. Numbers remained between 3,300 and 3,500 for the next fifteen years. This decreased a little, to around 2,800 by 1977 and 2,200 by the early 1980s. However by the end of the eighties – the home video decade – the numbers slid to below 1,000, by which time the major studios had bought up the chains and leased the screens to promote the same first-run product that dominated hardtop cinemas elsewhere.⁴

America's love affair with the motorcar is well known, and has always been adoringly fostered by the cinema. The image of a young white male driving an open-topped car down the streets of his home town, whistling at girls and pulling over to a diner to hang out with buddies, is as pervasive a slice of American iconography as one can find. From the youth-oriented films of the 1950s, like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), to the purposeful mythologizing of *American Graffiti* (1973, – not to mention ambivalence





excuse set in the streets.
Basket Case (1981)
sells America for that
little it's Juggo!
to see the film from this fantastic poster for
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974)

Deep South, for instance, might need some coaxing in (a pristine New York), they weren't the only ones playing the game. The term 'Franchise Print' was coined in the industry to describe a version cut together not by the producer or distributor but by the owner of the drive-in circuit. As fans began to compare notes, certain titles gained mythic reputations – and thus repeat business – as they turned up again. Wildly different versions of extremity were discovered in prints strewn nationwide as committed fans would drive hundreds of miles to see a film in a neighbouring state, hoping to catch it anew. And if the drive-ins were letting you down, you could always make the ultimate exploitation pilgrimage and trek to New York, where, running West to East in the Manhattan Island, the Satanic El Dorado of exploitation awaited you.

42nd Street Monsters

For Exploitation fans born too late to go there, the image of New York's 42nd Street as a Danteanic hell-and-vice-of-hell is incredibly seductive. Other cities also had their share of sleazy cinemas,⁵ but as a nerve centre of sheer stimulation this dense cluster of movie theatres and porno houses possessed a diabolical glamour, something that still excites the imagination today. Bill Landis, writer of *Street and Express*, the essential chronicle of the New York grindhouse scene, describes the area. Times Square was America's most notorious red-light district, located within the esteemed Broadway theater hub. From the early 1960s, its main artery was known as the Deuce, a tiny strip of grimy neon and concrete that coldly cut out 42nd Street between 7th and 8th Avenues. The street was wall-to-wall grindhouses, down-at-the-heels creations left over from the Minsk's Burlesque days, old theaters that retained a stained, venous elegance and an imposing physicality, with large auditoriums, balconies, big scarlet velvet curtains, and long ago closed off opera seats.

To brave a screening of *Torture Dungeon* (Andy Milagran, 1970), *Itsa*, *The Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmondson, 1975) or *Fight for Your Life* (Robert Endeason, 1977), one of these notorious venues you needed either nerves, steel, blissful ignorance, or a bit of the psycho in your own head. Ushers admitted anyone with a ticket, and inside the theatre an assortment of wags, weirdos and erkoffs could settle in for the day, uninterrupted. Drugs were scored and consumed, sex sought and obtained in toilets or tenebrous balcony seats, and a gentleman wouldn't want to get involved with played-out in row after sticky-floored row of crud-flecked seating.

Hunkering down amid this Boschian circus were few, just a few, who had come specifically for the movie. Film fans like John Waters, up from Baltimore to soak up as much trash cinema as possible. Landis, of course. Others such as Rick Sullivan, editor of the *Sleazy*, influenced *Los Angeles* and Bob Martin, editor of the *New York Times* *Fangoria*, were among the writers eager to venture into these environs in search of transgressive epiphanies, or failing that, just a handful of memorable moments in the parade of horror-action sexploitation drizzle. Landis, in particular, was at home there. A chronicler and hard-nosed cynic, he documented the cinema ambience as much as the movies, and his books *Street and Express* are notable more as gonzo reports from the brink of amphetamine psychosis than as film journalism *per se*. Landis seemed to take Nietzsche's aphorism about the abyss looking into you and not the other way round, but a warning.

Others who frequented the 42nd Street grindhouse included filmmakers who were themselves soon to contribute to the excesses served up there. William Lustig, who made his directing debut in 1977 at the age of 22 with a porno flick called *The Violation of Jean Harlow* (released under the pseudonym Billy Baggett) was a regular 42nd Street patron, soaking up a constant diet of sex, horror and imported Italian action flicks. He told Candice and John McCarty: "I was neglected to be used to cut school and go to 42nd Street and then see movie after movie. I fell in love with everything I saw, from the art pictures to the Harry Novak type sexploitation pictures I used to sneak into." Lustig especially loved horror movies, and so struck a deal

executive producer Judd Hamilton and actor Joe Spinell to make their own. The result was *Mondo* (1980), a legendary grim exercise in violence and sleaze that divided horror fans at the time. These days the film has been partially reclaimed by the fans but in the early 1980s it was treated as symptomatic of all that was 'sick' and 'irresponsible' about the modern horror genre. For those of us who have always loved this nasty take on cinema's comments in the review section), such arguments were just a side-salad to the menu of Lustig's film. Here was a director who had obviously studied hard at the 42nd Street lecture halls of sleaze.

Another self-taught aficionado of horror to be found haunting the sleaziest screens of the area was Frank Henenlotter, soon to be the celebrated director of *Basket Case* (1981). Henenlotter began by making Super-8mm shorts, with titles like *Stash of the Knife* and *The Shameful Women*, homemade horrors that mimicked the bad taste of his favourite trash films. Moving on to the 8mm of 16mm, Henenlotter made *Basket Case* one of the few films to act both as a bona fide 42nd Street movie and a self-conscious homage to its predecessors. It's interesting to note that both Lustig and Henenlotter eventually withdrew from filmmaking to pursue their love of grindhouse films by releasing them on DVD. Henenlotter through *Blue Underground* and with *Something Weird*, and Lustig with *Anchor Bay* and his own company, *Blue Underground*.

Not everyone felt the ambivalent affection-repulsion of the region expressed by writers like Bill Landis. For critics and moralists, 42nd Street came to epitomise a brand of cynical, amoral cinema, and if an upright filmmaker wanted to suggest that screen horror and real life horror were causally interlinked, he could always film a murderous character strolling down the very streets where such joys as *The Bloodthirsty Butchers* (Andy Maligan, 1970) or *Shriek of the Mutilated*

(Michael Findlay, 1974) were playing. As a region where drugs and prostitution were at epidemic levels, and which was effectively decimated by crack during the mid-eighties, one might counter that social policies on these issues, and not sleazy movies, were the real reason that the streets seemed to crawl with the viciousness seen on the screens of the Deuce. But it nevertheless became typical for a screen killer to be shown prowling the 42nd Street drag, as if there was some inexorable link between the screaming billboards and the actions of the patrons. 42nd Street became synonymous with sickness, and by implication the habits of an American icon at least as influential as those smooth 1950s boys in their Chevy convertibles we talked about earlier. I'm referring to the serial killer, the sex sadist, the psychopath.

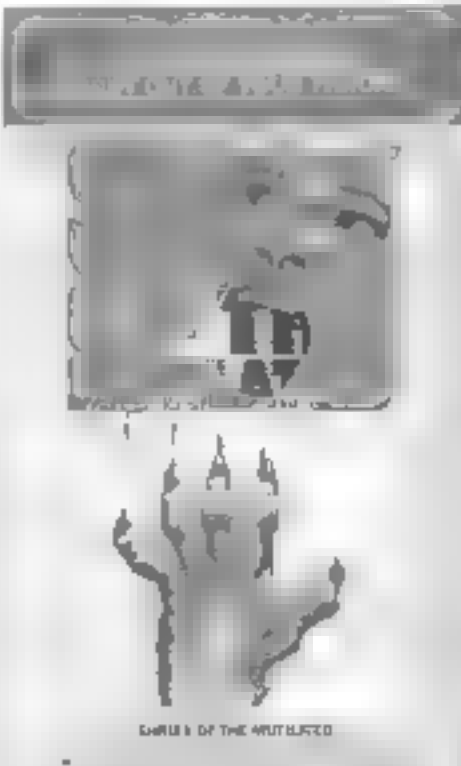
Serial Killers

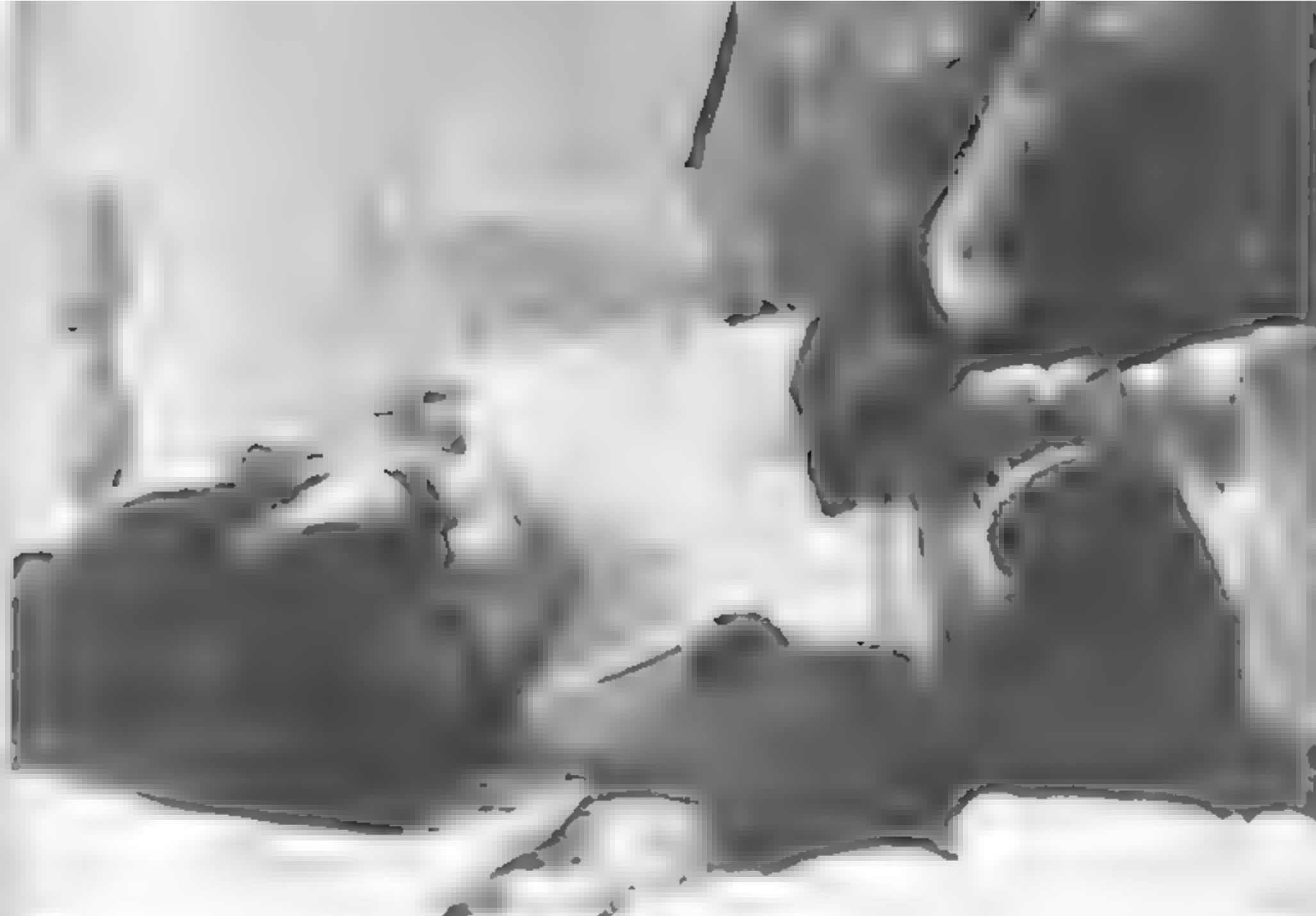
Serial killing impacted heavily on America's collective psyche in the sixties and seventies, when Charles Manson, David Berkowitz, Dean Corll, John Wayne Gacy, Edmund Kemper, Ted Bundy, Henry Lee Lucas and a blizzard of others slammed the concept into the mass cultural consciousness. It's hardly surprising that cinema should react to this by offering audiences a staged glimpse of the horrors so darkly hinted at in TV and newspaper coverage. Crimes such as Ted Bundy's savage assault on a Florida co-ed dorm in the January of 1978, killing two girls and severely bludgeoning two others, sent ripples of terror across America, and it wasn't long before the genre responded by inviting filmmakers to confront their worst imaginings of such crimes onscreen.

A serial killer is defined as someone who commits at least three murders, separated in time with a cooling off period in between, during which time they will seem perfectly normal, holding down a regular job or even, like Bundy, maintaining a marriage in which the partner is



Shriek of the Mutilated was produced by [redacted] Adlum (the man responsible for *Invasion of the Blood Farmers* and [redacted] New York exploitation pioneer [redacted]). Although the brilliantly excessive outbings the contents it's still a [redacted] low-rent treat. In fact it's [redacted] next to Findlay's most [redacted].





Maniac's
man (Nicholas Worth) in
the phone booth
A Sweet Little Phone

of the
in the
the Hitchcock's
novel based on
the novel and



unaware of their criminal activity (crucial, it's this 'cooling-off' period that makes the serial killer such an enticing villain for the horror genre). Maniacs who can hide their madness tend to foreshorten narrative, so it's better to feature a killer who keeps the audience guessing hidden behind an ordinary-Joe persona. In the 1970s, the horror genre began to make the real-world nightmare of serial killers its source material, and as the crimes of sadistic killers were reported with increasing prurience in the news, the genre's response, further fostered by the relaxation of censorship, grew more explicit and uncompromising.

While some will find the notion of a film producer taking inspiration from such crimes despicable, it's worth considering the way in which horror films help us to deal with our fears. A fear left unscrutinised festers and grows but a fear confronted is at least containable. No power in America could stem the tide of mass shivings – therefore young people, for whom horror films are so attractive and who comprise the most likely market for killers, need some way of visualising and thus dealing with the threat. Violent horror films offer a way of doing this, as well as feeding the morbid fascination that real-life brutality inspires. The slasher movies and sorority house horrors of the late 1970s and 1980s may have been mounted primarily for money's sake, but they appealed to a huge 16-25 audience, perhaps because of the way they deprive frightening, often salacious news reports of the exclusivity, drawing 'beyond-the-pale' imagery into the

fantasy arena where it can be subject to the prism of imagination. Looked at in this way, it seems odd that the perpetrators of atrocity should be denied a reward – to allow such crimes to be *literally* unspeakable and thus to be honoured by taboos is to confer authority upon the criminal.

For those concerned with the issue of bad taste, exploitation's response to reality, it's worth pointing that Alfred Hitchcock was there very early, with *Psycho* (1960) based on the crimes of Wisconsin necrophiliac murderer Ed Gein. From a 21st Century standpoint remarkable, this *Psycho*, a studio picture by one of industry's most respected directors, was released years after Gein was apprehended in November, making it something of an 'exploitation' film in retrospect. Hitchcock, a frequent visitor to the horror in his film and TV work, was an artist of rampant morbidity, but even he found it necessary to draw over some of the more revolting details of the Gein case, however, as David Cronenberg has suggested, it probably had more to do with the restrictions of the time than any innate reserve on Hitchcock's part.⁸ *Psycho* went on to inspire radically visceral reworkings like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Thing* (1982). *Psycho* was so macabre and macabre associated with them in the public imagination, that in many ways they joined the Jack the Ripper killings in that odd moral purgatory where salacious and sadistic myth and fantasy

However this 'comfort zone' of the macabre — which dastardly Victorian slashers and folksy grave-robbers are allowed to cavort in — was unable to contain the horrors unleashed in the news stories of the 1970s. Horror films responded by adopting a grimmer, darker tone: the genre was no longer guaranteed to be spooky, escapist fun. The Exploitation Independents took notice of the headlines and media scare stories and began crafting films with a downbeat, upsetting vibe. Among the films that address the subject of serial murder are *Abducted* (Don Jones, 1973); *Victims* (1977); *Hitch Hike to Hell* (1977); *The Toolbox Murders* (Dennis Donnelly, 1977); *Sketches of a Strangler* (Paul Leder, 1978); *Bloodrage* (Joseph Zito, 1979); *Don't Answer the Phone* (Robert Hamner, 1979); *Don't Go in the House* (Joseph Ellison, 1979); and *Montage* (1980).

If there's one thing such films agree upon, it's that hitchhiking is a shortcut to death. In the early 1970s increasing numbers of disaffected youths, influenced by the promise of social and sexual liberation, were eagerly relocating to the big cities looking for fun and freedom, but in order to 'live the dream' they had to cross the wide-open spaces of America, hitchhiking through county after county, state after state. A boy or girl could get lost on such a journey, and there were predators on the highways worse than any wolf or bear. Considering the alarming number of serial killers operating in California during the 1970s, it seemed as if these human monsters were picking up the very scent of the counterculture youth hunting them down as they flocked to free-thinking San Francisco and Los Angeles. Perhaps it's a testament to the groundbreaking changes of the hippy era that a new strain of evil emerged in the seventies to provide the shadow to social and sexual liberation.

Meanwhile, the counterculture produced its own iconic monster in the form of Charles Manson, whose role as murder-guru to acid-guzzling dropouts like Charles 'Tex' Watson, Patricia Krenwinkel, Susan Atkins and Leslie Van Houten sent shockwaves through bourgeois America. Hot on the heels of the Manson Family's capture, *Janie* (Jack Bravman, 1970) depicted a young female kidnaper whose blonde psychopathy echoes that of the Manson girls. *Sweet Savior* (Bob Roberts, 1972) had ex-teen heart-throb Troy Donahue, in long hair as a Manson figure exhorting the kids to murder; the disturbing docudrama *The Other Side of Madness* (Frank Howard, 1970) and the inaccurate and unconvincing *The Manson Massacre* (Kentucky Jones, 1972) went so far as to depict the case directly; and *The Centerfold Girls* (John Peyser, 1974) had it both ways, with a nerdy serial kidnaper whose first victim falls into his hands having already suffered a night of rape and humiliation at the hands of a Manonesque hippy gang. *Snuff* (1976), originally shot in 1971 as *Slaughter* by Michael and Robert Findlay, features a Manonesque cult, but the film was unreleased at the time and only came to notoriety when Alan Shackleton and Simon Nuchtern added a fake snuff sequence to the ending, thus tapping into rumours of the Manson family's own supposed snuff atrocities (none of which have ever been found). On a related note, there's a counterculture vibe to the killer triad in that extraordinary grindhouse classic *The Headless Eyes* (1971); *Trip with the Truckee* (Earl Burton, 1975) resurrects another counterculture bad-guy: the psychotic biker; and the two female psychos in the

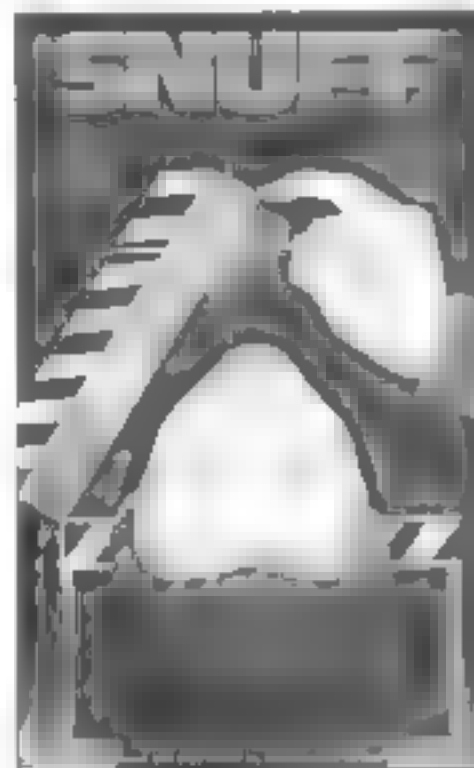


and *Death Game* (Peter Travnot, 1976) share the anti-bourgeois attitudes and grinning, unsympathetic sadism of the Family girls.

Coming at murder from quite a different angle to Manson and his gang of sociopaths, the psycho Vietnam veteran brought it all back home for American filmmakers in equally disturbing fashion. The ultra-obscure *The Ravager* (Charles Nazel, 1970), about a Vietnam vet with an explosives fetish, may have been the first to make it to the screen. *My Friends Need Killing* (Paul Leder, 1976) takes a thoughtful, downbeat spin on the subject, but the most shocking treatment of the topic has to be the horror porn nightmare *Forced Entry* (Shaun Costello, 1972), a virtually indefensible piece of nastiness that nevertheless authentically summons the rage and bitterness felt by devoted soldiers who found themselves back in menial jobs after participating in the most terrible State-sanctioned atrocities. Oddly though, the most persuasive and eloquent treatment of the returning Vietnam veteran came in a fantasy context, *Deathdream* (1972), in which a young man called Andy returns home from the war, apparently to resume his small-town family life. What his family and friends don't realise is that Andy's really dead — he led an action during the prologue (in a steal from the classic ghost story *The Monkey's Paw* by W.W. Jacobs), he has returned without conscience, without warmth, without humanity, in order to stay mobile: he needs blood, and he wastes no time in obtaining it. *Deathdream* is full of bitter ironies about the mental state of soldiers returning to 'normal' life: you can't quite believe that Andy is capable of strangling a pet dog that annoys him, and when the police quiz locals about a mysterious soldier seen hitching a ride on the night a lorry driver was horribly killed, one woman says, 'I can't believe a soldier would do a thing like that!'

Wesley Eure as Kent, wholesome killer in double take *The Toolbox Murders*, a takes its inspiration from cases such as the killer Ted Bundy, who enacted the slaying of nurses in a single apartment.

Promo art for Michael Findlay's *Snuff*, the film that more than any other audience's fearful curiosities, life murder and mutilation must frequently have the sixty minutes of boredom that the film's last.





POOR ALBERT
WILL MAKE YOU RICH
AT THE BOXOFFICE!

DON'T OPEN
THAT DOOR!



Albert
 may be
 there

Poor Albert
& Little Annie



Produced by [illegible]
 Directed by [illegible]

But while hippies and children saw potential in the movie, it was selling at home by water, and pressed into circulation by the American Film Institute, the movie's references to the past were not as strong as they once were. The movie's first release in 1975 was a disappointment, and it was not until the 1980s that the movie's reputation began to rise. The movie's success was due to its portrayal of a child's life, and its ability to connect with a new generation of viewers. The movie's success was also due to its portrayal of a child's life, and its ability to connect with a new generation of viewers.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the movie's success was its ability to connect with a new generation of viewers. The movie's success was due to its portrayal of a child's life, and its ability to connect with a new generation of viewers. The movie's success was also due to its portrayal of a child's life, and its ability to connect with a new generation of viewers.

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evil. Picking up on this, and taking cues from earlier models like *The Bad Seed* (1956) and *Village of the Damned* (1960), the seventies introduced killer kids as a viable horror subgenre. *Devil Times Five* (Sean MacGregor, 1973), *The Child* (Robert Viskind, 1976), *Bloody Birthdays* (Ed Hunt, 1980), *The Children* (Max Kalmanowicz, 1980), and *Friday the 13th: The Orphan* (1977), all featured kids with a grudge, grieffully determined to turn the tables on their elders and upset natural law. The *reductio ad absurdum* can be found in Larry Cohen's twin titles for Warner Brothers, *It's Alive* (1974) and *It Lives Again* (1978), about marauding killer babies. Both films have interesting concepts floundering in a stodgy, uninvolved directorial style, and are totally eclipsed by the Canadian David Cronenberg's far more compelling meditation on family dysfunction, *The Brood* (1979).

Among the most interesting films about multiple murder are those that try in some way to understand or explore the humanity of their sick protagonists. Homeric madness is depicted within a broadly sympathetic framework in films like *Dream To Evil* (John Hayes, 1972), *Psychopath* (Larry Brown, 1972), *Pigs* (Marc Lawrence, 1972), *Homobodies* (Larry Yust, 1973), *Inducted* (1973), *Axe* (Frederick Friedel, 1974), *The Premontion* (1975), and *The Mafu Cage* (Karen Arthur, 1977). Even the much maligned *Don't Go in the House* (1979) and *Murder* (1980) take time out from the violence to show us their killers' weakness and pain. The challenge for the filmmaker of course is to find an actor capable of withstanding the necessary scrutiny (a challenge most of the above rise to admirably), but perhaps the real reason why such treatments are rare in the horror genre is that they would obviate suspense, thus removing from the genre's arsenal one of the major sources of dramatic value. We tend to view killers we've come to know less with fear than despair; and despair is an emotion that is rather less commercially persuasive.

Natural all the films covered in this book take the same kind of routes through their subject matter, but there was in the 1970s a general turning away from frivolity in the genre and a greater will to face the truly horrific. It may seem perverse to those who regard movies like *Murder* as the scummiest the genre has to offer, but I would argue that the darker, more grisly or downbeat horror films of the era are morally justified, thanks to their determination to send you home feeling stunned and/or nauseated. Bearing in mind the real-life inspirations for such filmic excesses, it seems only right that we should take a 'reality-check' here and there. The horror genre is a place where fantasies and morbid wish-fulfilment can cavort unshackled, but as we vicariously dance around in the moonlight with our imaginary victim's face and it is strapped to ours, it's perhaps worth glancing over at the real world, in which most of us conspicuously fail to 'get a kick' from torture and murder. Fantasy violence is a rush, there's no doubt about it, but it's a game, a charade, a luxurious indulgence; and when the game's over, you have to admit it's a far cry from reality. For all the thrill of a truly nasty horror film, how many of us really want murder and mutilation to play a part in our lives? Films that acknowledge this, even as they push the boundaries of what can be shown, demonstrate a realism that balances the more superficial thrills of horror's *bona fide* big budget circa 1979-85: the slasher genre.

Psycho-Killer, Qu'est-ce que c'est?

Long before John Carpenter's stylish *Halloween* (1978) received the cineastes' seal of approval for knife-wielding maniacs, there were already quite a few slashers stalking the darkened corridors of the silver screen. *Halloween* is a great film that survives multiple viewings, because it establishes the ideal way of presenting its hackneyed material – but let no one be deceived, for it arrived out of a clear blue sky. Effective it may have been, innovative it was not. The slasher genre had been around for quite some time and there were already some formidable contenders.

Putting aside the Italian *giallo* genre (a major influence on slasher cinema), one of the most accomplished North American precursors was *Black Christmas* (1974), a Canadian production directed by American citizen Bob Clark, who eventually became renowned for the 'tits-and-zits' teen comedy *Parky's* (1982). *Black Christmas* substantially pre-empted both the plotting and stylistic strategies of *Halloween*, and takes place around a major public holiday while possessing a chilly approach to characterisation that matches the tenacity of its killer. In direct comparison, *Halloween* is an experience as warmly creepy as the orange glow of a jack-o'-lantern. *Black Christmas* can give even post-*Scream* viewers a serious case of the shudders, as it employs techniques more typical of the Hollywood Movie Brats to unsettle our sense of moral and emotional security. Characters initially designated as decent people are given spiky and foul-mouthed qualities (especially Margot Kidder, who – were we to believe Peter Biskind's account of her in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* – probably ad-libbed her own profanity). The film has that trust no one aura redolent both of early seventies paranoia (Coppola, Watergate etc.) and the aforementioned *giallo* genre. An artistic 'sensitive' character is prone to bouts of petty destructiveness, adults are given cues that blur the line of generational responsibility (the sorority's 'den mother' is a well-meaning but inept alcoholic) and the overall threat emerges from what was to become one of the most shop-worn of sources, the menacing telephone caller (see Mario Hava's 1963 classic *Black Sabbath*). The film begins with a party atmosphere (modishly conveyed with overlapping dialogue) that is then twisted by the sheer savagery of the phone pervert. So much hinges on him that the voice artist deserved higher pay than the onscreen actors. It's a screeching, painful, nails-down-a-blackboard performance wandering between the extremes of total control and total loss of control that conveys the character's escalating terror and fear. By the time the film delivers its big twist – a fresh one at the time – the combination of chilly winter setting, skilled acting and prowling camerawork is likely to have thoroughly unnerved its audience.

Communion (Alfred Sole, 1976) also deserves a mention for its tricky plotting, strong performances and shocking eruptions of violence. There's a knife attack here that rivals anything the genre has to offer, not in terms of its graphic special effects (although they're very good), but in the writing, editing, staging, acting and overall conception. *Communion*, concerning murders that may or may not be committed by a disturbed teenage girl, is such a strong, intelligent film that in many ways one would have placed money on Sole as a future big wheel rather than John Carpenter. It's really a shame this never came to pass.

With *Black Christmas* already out there, it wasn't long before film producers realised there was something



A characteristically unnerving image from Alfred Sole's *Communion*.

Child star Brooke Shields made a splash in two films that exploited her mature sex beauty. In *Love Made a Pretty Baby* (1978) made when Shields was just 13, she played a pre-pubescent girl brought up in a whorehouse, and in Randal Kueper's *The Blue Lagoon* (1980) at 15, she discovered her budding sexuality when shipwrecked with a teenage boy (Christopher Atkins) on a desert island. Hoping to make a splash on the Queen of Under-Age Nudity's box-office draw, *Communion* was re-released as *Heavy Terror* with poster art bragging of her involvement, although she is in bed on screen for just a few minutes. However, perverts hoping for an illicit glimpse of Shields pre-*Pretty Baby* will have been frustrated by the distinct lack of under-age flesh on show.





of the X-mas-Santa films. *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984) beats the almost *path* of *Christmas Evil* (1980) by a member's neck thanks to its inspired and calm mood. Its original poster art shows a figure coming down a chimney, only to find a bloody axe in place.

by Christian and Family as Adam Rockoff has reported demonstrators gave horror fans a sense of laughter by holding placards which read "Deck the Halls with Holly, Not Blood" and "Santa's Not Stay". Although these films are theatrical when the summer demonator got cold feet, *Silent Night, Deadly Night* said like hot minds pines on a video. Note how the video art above shows evidence of Christmas, Santa or songs of the Season.

in his ginsy scenes from *The Ghastly Ones* (1968) Andy Milligan's art, kinky sex, family and mental relaxation that's either a or stupefying, depending on your pr message.

141 subgenre, directed by Lemon Popsicle creator Boaz Davidson and Burt Benton, one-time girlfriend boss Hugh Haider



compelling (and inherently marketable) about horror films set during a specific time of year. Firstly of course the promotional advantage of a ready-made red-letter launch day is immense. Then there's the way in which teen audiences experience seasonal intervals: as each yearly celebration goes by, even the most carefree of fifteen-year-olds grows aware of the passage of time. When you're a teenager, to be a year older than another is to occupy an entirely different social milieu. Teenagers thus possess a different temporal awareness. Three years is a long time; five years is tantamount to a generation gap. In general it's only with yearly holidays and special dates that younger people are reminded of the passage of time, and thus perhaps their own mortality. Yearly rituals let the future as well as the past leak through: once again, like last year you're trick-or-treating, once again, like last year, it's Christmas, once again, like last year, it's Valentine's Day, but how many more will you see? Many successful slasher flicks take a significant annual event as their cue for violence and death, and in so doing touch a raw nerve for a teenage target audience otherwise shored up with a sense of their own invulnerability.

There are subgenres in slasherdom as elsewhere in the horror genre. Besides the "Special Occasion Slashers" (*Bloody Birthday*, *Happy Birthday to Me*, *My Bloody Valentine*, *April Fool's Day*, *Halloween*, *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, *Christmas Evil*, *New Year's Evil*) there were the "Summer Camp Slaughterthons" (*Friday the 13th*, *The Burning*, *Madman*, *Sleepaway Camp*), the "Sorority Abattoirs" (*The House on Sorority Row*, *Sorority House Massacre*, *To All a Goodnight*), the "Faker Flickers" (*Don't Go in the Woods*, *The Forest*, *The Prey*), the "Slack and Slash Colleges" (*Final Exam*, *Graduation Day*, *The Killing Touch*, *Pranks*, *The Screamaker*, *Prom Night*, *Night School*), and the "Horror Hospitals" (*X-Act*, *Visiting Hours*).

What's notable is how many slashers were bankrolled by major studios, after picking up the first as an independent. Paramount handled the *Friday the 13th* series, as well as *Night School*, *April Fool's Day* and the Canadian *My Bloody Valentine*. Columbia stumped up for *When a Stranger Calls* and the Canadian *Happy Birthday to Me* and MGM produced *He Knows You're Alone*. The list grows longer when you include independently produced films that nonetheless received nationwide distribution from the majors. In the course of this book, however, we'll be looking at some of the less frequently celebrated examples of the format, made and distributed solely by the Exploitation Independents.

Slashers I adore!

There's something wonderfully satisfying about the slasher film. Yes, it's unsophisticated. No, there's not much of a case for it as a valuable contribution to cinema, but by and large to do what its detractors claim it does. It's cheap and nasty. It trades in the devaluation of the individual. The craft of the actor is neglected. Audiences are offered only the most primitive of stimuli: death, mutilation, skinny-dipping teens. This is all true. It sounds awful; and yet, for me, these films are some of the most thrilling and enjoyable slices of genre hokum you can find. I adored these films, whether overstuffed (*Happy Birthday to Me*) or undernourished (*Pranks*, Stephen Carpenter & Jeff Ohrow, 1982), when they first came out, and still.

love seeing them today. Just as fans of other eras found their taste for schlock endowed Rondo Hatton or Monogram B-movies with a certain retro charm, so too the slashers, once admittedly overshadowed by the artist-wonkers of Dario Argento, David Cronenberg and George Romero, look distinctly more fun today.

It isn't just a matter of gore, arterial sprays, close-ups of wounds (although such considerations are of course right up there). What really propels these movies is the satisfying chase-and-kill formula, leading inexorably to a shameless enjoyment of the moment of death: gruesome death, given maximum impact by taut editing, voyeuristic camera angles and nerve-scraping music. The murder scene in a good slasher film is a production number, with screams and blood instead of song and dance. Creativity, such as it is, is located in the choreography between the essentials. Scary music leads the apprehensive viewer to a swiftly edited, percussively orchestrated frenzy of now-you-see-now-you-don't delirium, as the slash of the editor's razor spins you into ecstatic appreciation of another minor character's demise. The formula is perfect. Set up a crowd of naive teens and let them feel the joy of the audience's surrogate blade for ninety minutes. Bliss.

In fact it's often so blissful that I find myself liking these doomed high school klutzes as soon as they begin, touting their dumb-ass trademarks. What a paradox! Precisely *because* they are so naive and clichéd, I love these hormonal jocks and dope-smoking cheerleaders who soon give me immense pleasure by meeting hideous violent death. As I anticipate it, I find myself looking benevolently on the sort of characters I might otherwise have despised. I love the dumb teens of these films, warm glow as they act out their silly practical jokes, their breast-fondling liaisons, and their flimsy anti-aids acts. As they fulfil in that wonderful voyeuristic way the requirements of the slasher movie victim, traits that could have been contemptible become cute and lovable. Watching the materialistic beach-babes and sexist volleyball hunks of *Slaughter Party Massacre* (Sally Matsun, 1994) driving down a coastal road in an open-topped car, listening to awful AM pop-rock, I hug them with excitement, treasuring my affection for these bubbly heads and jackasses. They are my friends and I can't wait to see them die. I feel the thrill of betrayal as I glee-anticipate the deaths they are yet to suffer. Re-watching these films seems to make them not less but *more* fun. I confess that I sometimes watch only the first half of these movies, when the characters are yet to die, because dimwit poignancy of their empty lives is even more satisfying to observe than their death throes.

There are some truly riveting examples of the formula, and there are a few that try even my patience. I consider myself an easy convert to any passing half a will to offend. Be formulaic. Be obvious! Bring off *Friday the 13th* as much as you like! Just be chase people, maim them and kill them, and I displays of 'zany college humour', 'dope-smoking teenage sex' with the intrusion of a serrated metallic tool. I'm an easily pleased consumer of this degenerate cinema, so go for it. Just kill them all. Is it asking much? I want the mindless repetition; it's one effluent of the mechanised era that I find curiously pleasurable. I would watch a ten-hour slasher film. I'd watch a twenty-four-hour slasher film. As long as the victims were increased in proportion to the running time.

could be there, best seat in the house with matchsticks
stung my eyeballs, eager to see it all, including the
crude ball games and skinny-dipping, the fake tarot
reads and campsite canoeing.

Okay, after I've waxed lyrical on the morality of
seeing horror films, this eulogy to superficial schlock
seems a little callous, but in essence I try to keep both
sides in mind when I discuss the genre. Personally I
don't think horror fans have a leg to stand on if they try to
reject the more tasteless elements. Stephen King, who
entertainingly about all kinds of horror films in his
recent non-fiction book *Dance Macabre* (1980), made an
characteristically punned judgement when he tried to
draw a wedge between classy, even arty horrors like
Night of the Dead, and what I presume was a dim
impression of an Andy Morgan double bill (King attacked
non-existent movie called *The Bloody Mutilators* for an
uned buzz-saw killing, which sounds like he's merging
the title of *The Bloodthirsty Butchers* with the mayhem of
the *One*). Morgan's deeper idiosyncrasies aside
for the moment, it seems to me that if you want to raise a
stap for the modern horror film there's no point getting
into about screen violence. When Kim, whose I writes
stories but is entirely around a single gross idea, it
isn't pretty rich to criticise the cinema equivalent
noted, his craftsmanship leaves Morgan standing, but
judging by his affection for hopelessly bad movies
in his book, I don't think that's why King refers
to ghastlyhouse films as "horrons with cameras".

Now, the grubby likes of *The Ghastly Ones* or *The
Live on the Left* offend not only because they show
brutish violence, but also because in their grainy, low-
budget, shaky-cam amateurism they transgress notions of
decorum as they do so.

Although my expression of enthusiasm for the slasher
has so far emphasised just the sadistic component of
responses, my guess is that the audience's enjoyment
runs the gamut across a spectrum that also includes the
scholar's desire to be shocked and in some way vicari-
ously assaulted. It certainly works that way with me. In
films such as the slashers, where an objective narrative
evades of plausible three-dimensional characterisation
effectively shuts off the possibility of engagement with real
people in the wider world, and instead draws its energy
from varying parts of the viewer's own psyche, the thrill
the viewer feels is a closed loop incorporating the actions of
the aggressor and victim. A good slasher movie withholds the
murders with mounting suspense, tantalising but also
entertaining the viewer, then paying off with a jolting,
rocking attack. It's quite obvious that a "tension-and-release
stuff" is engaging the viewer's
uncovering libidinal desires, whether conscious or
unconscious. And if that sounds dangerous, it's worth
repeatedly emphasising that, like the sexual practice of
sadoomasochism, it all takes place within a consensual
environment. The audience buy their tickets for a slasher
horror film, reveling in the adrenaline rush of aggression
and the concomitant flinch of fear. No one really gets hurt
and if the film has some skill the audience leaves the theatre
in a high. As for what happens later, in the street or the
home, I have never subscribed to the theory that violence in
films begets violence in real life: they are two utterly
distinct regions of reality, and to treat them as causally
linked is to offer a blank cheque to moral cowards. No film
can take responsibility for our actions in the real world: to

The Exploitation Independents

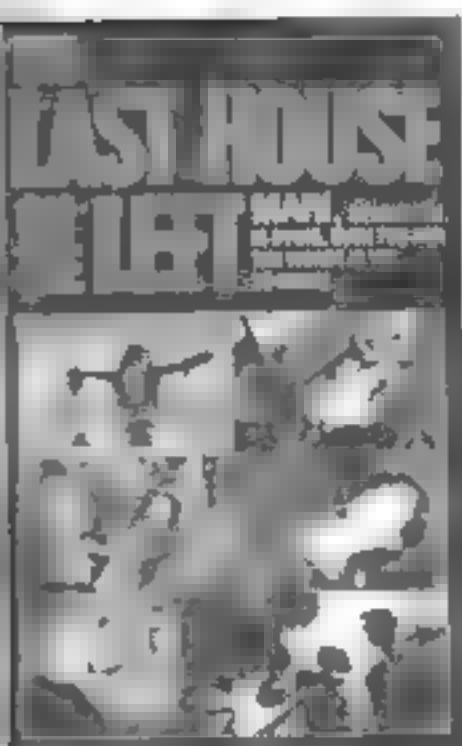




poster for *The Last House on the Left* made at Man Collingwood

ad designer choosing in frame. Man is from Krug's car boot, just in the woods tied in the

arts scene and



deo sleeve for Raptay release

say so is to dismiss choice and abnegate responsibility. No one, except the hopelessly insane (perhaps, for whom even *Shrek* could be the trigger for psychosis) ever got so deeply involved in a film that they sat in their seat waiting for a jump-cut rather than their to take them home. Nothing you see on the movie screen can be blamed for your actions in the real world: to say so is either legal chicanery, moral dishonesty (Sartre's bad faith), or stupidity.

Many of the lesser criticisms levelled at slasher movies are built on false premises. For instance, it's now common place for audiences to scoff at the irrational, terrorized actions of slasher film heroines, always opening the wrong door at the worst possible time, always straying, darkened rooms without turning on the light, always spitting up from their friends when it's 'obvious' they're about to get it. Obvious to us, that is. These protests about unlikelihood show our fears in high relief: we hate it when characters make dangerous mistakes, because they're acting just like us. It's not as if there's *really* any reason why victim number two should hesitate to wander off just because victim number one hasn't returned from the summer-camp showers. We walk into darkened rooms all the time in our daily lives, even when briefly we think there's something 'funny' going on, we hardly ever believe that we're *really* going to die – more likely we're dismissing the misadventure as caused by too many horror films.

A slasher film may be dumb, but despite its flagrant mechanical technique it has the power to frustrate the audience's sense of control – and that creates anxiety pleasurable to some, upsetting to others. Sure, we know there's a mammoth at large somewhere, we can read the signs, we're aware of the genre conventions – but the moment, the exact form, the intensity and duration of the attack are things that we can't entirely predict. Hence, pleasure.

Scream. Wes Craven, 1996, was hailed as the moment that post-modern reflexivity entered the horror genre. In fact it merely crashed an ongoing party. An exposé and satire of genre? Audiences were already well aware of the codes and 'strategies' of the slasher film back in the early 1980s. The post-modern horror film merely tries to feed you your own perceptiveness. For *Scream*'s director Wes

Craven, the film offered a 'fixed fight' in which he gaudily planted rank on a genre to which he clearly feels superior. Much as I dislike *Scream* and its satellites, I have to admit that Craven does have one reason to feel superior, although it has nothing to do with the trendy pop-cynicism of his recent work: his best movie, and his first, *The Last House on the Left* (1972), far outdoes the slashers in brutality and sexual violence – and it's to this particular combination that

When Blood Is Not Enough

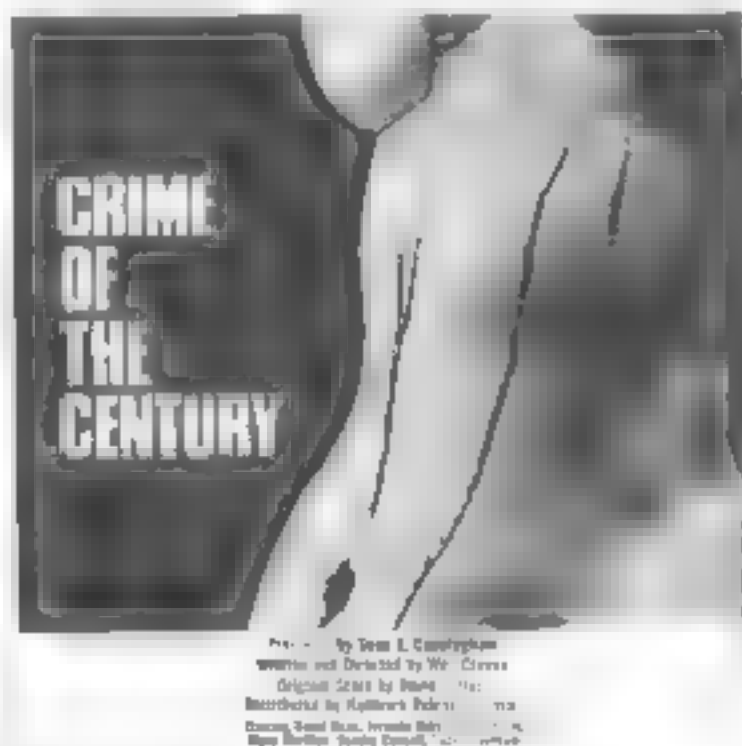
I wonder what the meanest, foulest, rottenest, woodiest crime ever was? Hey, Sadie, what do you think the crime of the century is?

Wense! Padowski in *The Last House on the Left*

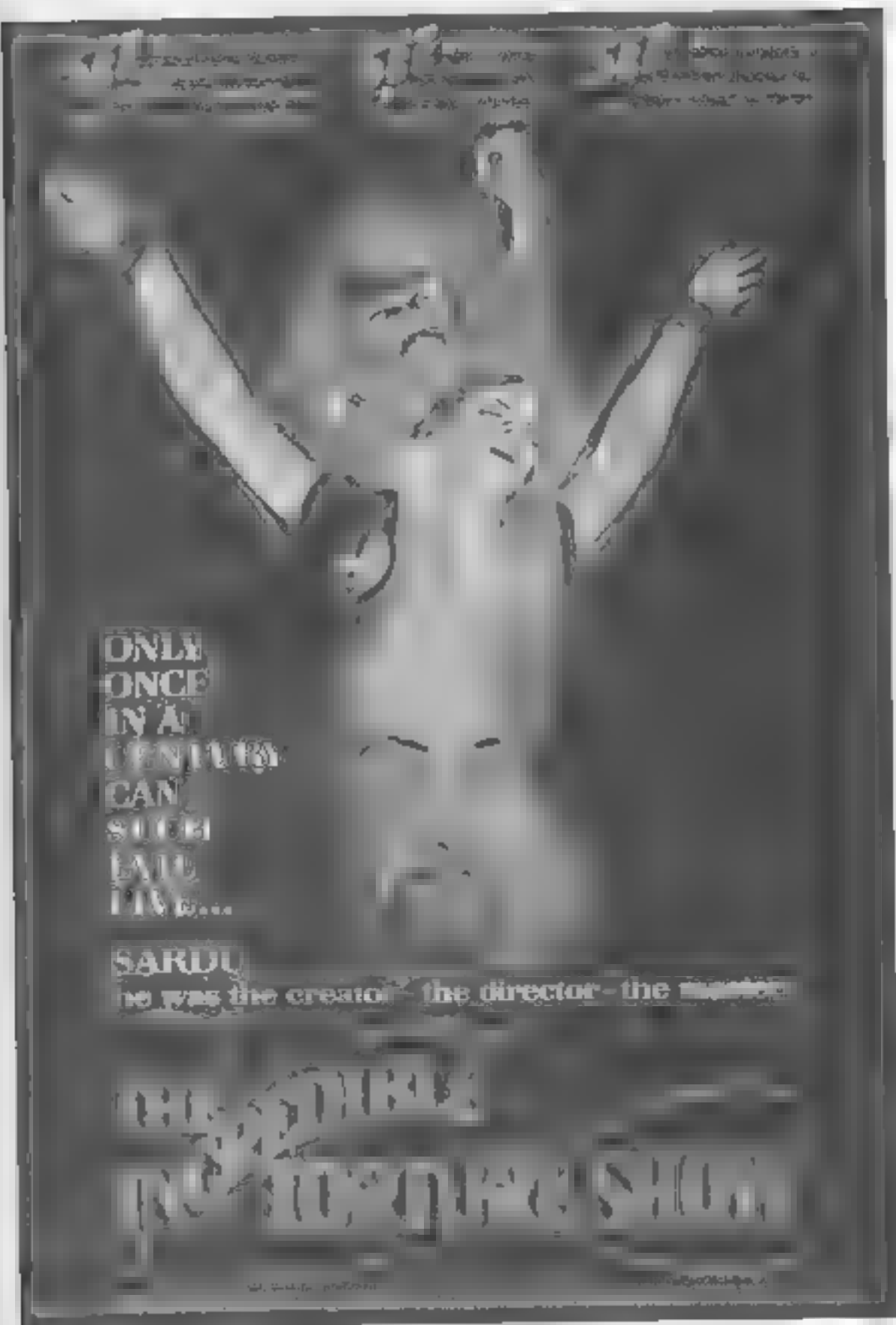
Sex and violence are the Alpha and Omega of exploitation and filmmakers in the seventies found ever more bizarre and startling ways to ricochet between them. Horror films sexier and sleazier, and sex films got bloodier and nastier. Although the really extreme material remained obscure (located far from the attentions of mainstream American film critics like Pauline Kael and Vincent Canby, enough of it reached an audience to create a demand for more).

Censorship restrictions were gradually relaxed during the late sixties and early seventies, and as a result sex films rose to another level. The Grove Press-distributed *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967) was the twelfth highest grossing picture in 1969 (\$6,606,000 that year), just behind the zeitgeist-defining youth hit *Easy Rider* (1969). Softcore turned to hardcore, kinkiness went ballistic, eccentricity and bizarre fantasy edged their way into the fray. It was breaking and all manner of exotic flora and fauna were being carried down the Deuce on the currents of exploitation. As the decade turned, Times Square became home to the furthest reaches of hardcore sex and horror. Looking back at the early 1970s, it's hard to believe just how sudden the transition was. Jack Genturo's 1971 sleaze-pic *D.O.G. (Devotions On Gratifications)* distributed by Shorlitz, who handled Jim Bidgood's amazing art-house epic *Pink Narcissus* (includes a scene mentioned casually by *Parade*, no less) in which, "A gay youth unsuccessfully attempts to arouse a German Shepherd." This casual reference to queer bestiality in the leading trade paper of the American film industry gives you some idea of the unimagined excesses towards which cinema was leaping as the 1970s dawned.

Foremost among those pushing the envelope of what could or could not be shown were Sean Cunningham and Wes Craven. In 1972 they declared open season on taste and restraint with a mind-blowing horror film called *The Last House on the Left*, written and directed by Craven and produced by Cunningham. Telling the story of two teenage girls who fall into the hands of a gang of sadists while scoring done before a rock concert, it featured tough, realistic performances (alongside some frankly awful ones, truth be told), and an unblinking depiction of sexual humiliation and violence. The vision of pitilessness summoned in the first half is so powerful that it can't even be eased by a contrived revenge twist in the second, in which Craven's script attempts to retrieve the situation for moral purposes. For many years, *The Last House on the Left* (if referred to at all), was used by critics as evidence of the utmost depravity to which the horror genre could sink.



THEATRE



ONLY
ONCE
IN A
CENTURY
CAN
SUCH
LATE
LIVE...

SARDU
he was the creator - the director - the monster

THE TORTURE SHOW

- Sex Wish
- Sex Machine
- Sex Torture Show
- Sex Freaks
- Sex Wish 1976
- Sex 1976

SEAVUE II

Rated XXX

SEX WISH

THE SEX TORTURE SHOW

From time to time, serious directors have expressed a wish to make porno that engages the broader complexities of cinema. In the late sixties Stanley Kubrick and Terry Southern discussed working together on a film treatment of Southern's book *Blue Movie*, the impetus being Kubrick's fascination with the challenge of making the first porno that might also be considered a work of art. The film was never made, but perhaps we saw just a little of what might have been in the film that Alex is shown in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), during his brainwashing against violence. Given the darkness expressed elsewhere in his work, it's not hard to imagine that a Kubrick porno film, as opposed to his erotic film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), would be one in which violence was an essential component.

So a handful of filmmakers have given the porno-horror film a shot, and scored a few successes. In Europe

Joe D'Amato and Jess Franco ventured repeatedly into the certain hetero genre of narrative and hardcore non-narrative. In America, Armand Weston, who began as a porno director before crossing over to horror to make the effective and well-known whorehouse tale, *The Nesting* (1980), demonstrated his aptitude with *The Defiance of Good* (1974), a sex-horror hybrid based around themes of mind-control, abduction and rape. Massively indebted to the Marquis de Sade (in particular his books *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* and *Le Justre de Juliette*), *Defiance* tells the story of Cathy Taylor (Jenn Jennings), a teenage girl committed to a mental institute by her puritanical parents because she's had sex with a boy against their wishes. In the asylum she causes more trouble, and so is placed in the care of Dr. Gabriel, a sinister fellow with some radical therapeutic ideas. Certainly he's off to his private sanatorium. Dr. Gabriel reprograms Cathy as a masochistic slave who will forever crave sexual violence. This is a dark and twisted work, replete with torment, and (just to make things nastier) it stars Fred Lincoln, sex-killer 'Weasel' from *The Last House on the Left*, as the sadistic doctor.

Michael Hugo is a mystery figure often said to have directed the mind-boggling sex-horror opus *Hardcore* (1974), a house name does not appear on the poster. *Hardcore* is another sexy-asylum picture, although the film is more absurd, featuring such once-in-a-lifetime images as flying severed penises spilling sperm, an image that perhaps shows an awareness of Kenneth Anger's 1947 debut, *Fireworks*. Amid the intimate examinations and group sex scenes, *Hardcore* casually inserts horrific imagery, not least a daunting medical fact: penis amputation sure to have sent a few unsuspicious theatre patrons fleeing in dismay. Worldly viewers today will know how the trick was done, but in a theatre it must have packed quite a wallop.

Also in a medical sex-horror vein, though more s than sleazy, is *The Sex Machine* (1971) by Eric Jeffer Hains (director of the awful but entertaining cheapie *Jekyll and Hyde Portfolio*). In another isolated medical institute, yet more sexual experiments are being carried on female subjects (or "surrogates"), supposedly to help with "fudinal problems". The 'Sex Machine' itself is a Rube Goldberg contraption able to "photograph the inside of the vagina and 'heal' (origami). Surprisingly, despite these complex medical aims, most of its function, application stems from a protruding, rapidly spinning d. All is well until the arrival of Jessica (Debra Christman), an aggressive SM dyke known as 'B g Daddy', who turns the hitherto hetero institute into erotic confusion. Jessica's development that could – and probably should – have been beaten up by enraged lesbian activists becomes addicted to the phallic Sex Machine, which is barred from the Institute. After taking out her frustrations on one of the female staff with the help of a whip and a pair of obnoxious bikers, 'B g Daddy' torches the lab by strapping herself into The Sex Machine for one last ride. "If I can't have it, nobody will!" she cries, before the machine electrocutes her in a shower of sparks.

The pinnacle of the horror-porno genre is *Sex II* (1976), variously credited to Tim McCoy, Victor M. Zebedy Colt (see review section). This one includes scenes of brutality and sexual violence that book them as both horror and porno. As we'll see, they offer other doorways in the horror genre, including the most offensive cinematic indulgences of the

Torture

Before Herschell Gordon Lewis, death in the movies was a swift, clean and painless affair. But while Lewis dragged out the demise of victims with a host of simultaneously grotesque and unconvincing special effects, the result was to push screen suffering into the realms of black comedy. Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* was a very different experience, taking the fun and hi-jinx out of the recipe and inaugurating real horror. The key difference was that although Lewis depicted graphic mutilation, his actors and actresses were utterly inept at showing emotion, and so there was never any sense of real suffering. *Last House* on the other hand was (mostly) well acted and directed, and thus showed suffering in a stark and plausible form. Craven and Cunningham can probably claim the credit for bringing realistic torture and rape into the genre.

Torture-kings inflict upon an individual the antithesis of the 'good death'. For the perpetrator it's pure hedonistic obscenity, a feasting upon another's pain, a total immersion in the sadistic drive. Torture is also heavily in cahoots with the voyeuristic urge. The sadist wants to see how much it hurts. Cinema is therefore the torture medium *par excellence*. Whatever happens we have to see, and to see it for longer and longer. (This is why Michael Haneke's *Fanny Gantz* (1997) is so powerful – although it shows hardly any physical violence, the fact that the victims are stuck a long time on the agony, fear and anguish of the victims is more than enough to compensate – this is Haneke's personal contribution to the cinema of sadism.)

Torture is about achieving a hyper-redundancy of feeling. It violates the idea of limits, of what's necessary, of how much is too much. This is where we leave the realm of simple aggression and jump up a register. It's all about pain. The nastiest torture scenes are those that open onto vistas unimpeded by the genre's conventional narrative clock. Roger Watkins's *The Last House on Dead End Street* (1977) is a perfect example – constraints like plot, narrative and characterisation are gradually pushed out of the frame and we have no idea how long the victims' pain, torture and humiliation will last.

However, even in the Exploitation Independent arena, drawn-out depictions of physical torture are quite rare. Humiliation, degradation, incarceration, and psychological torture are all more common. Among the Exploitation Independent films to depict sustained cruelty in some form are *Pets* (Raphael Nussbaumer, 1972), featuring humiliation and confinement, both male and female; *Attracted* (1973), with its incarceration and forced medical 'games'; *I Drink Your Blood* (1974), which features a ritualised torture scene; *Witch Who Came from the Sea* (1976), which features a woman's double castration of two bound men but fades on screams of the first; *Bloodsucking Freaks* (Joe M. Reed, 1976) of which more in a moment; *Death Game* (1976) with more humiliation and confinement of a male victim; *For Your Life* (1977), with verbal humiliation and confinement; *Don't Answer the Phone* (1979), with its pre-torture prior to murder; *Don't Go in the Water* (1979), with drawn-out preparations for murder as a woman is slowly doused in petrol; *Human Experiments* (Gregory Goodell, 1979), concentrating on psychological torture and the fear of creepy-crawlies; *Mother's Day* (Charles Kaufman, 1980) – rape and confinement, and of course *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) featuring intermittent physical and sustained



psychological torment. Of these, the only one to dwell on physical brutality for its own sake is *Bloodsucking Freaks*. So what does it offer the jaded horror film consumer?

Torture as Titillation! Blood as Belly Laugh! Pain as Panto! You gotta love it! And may anyone who disagrees with me roll down the backside to my 12-inch-spiked barrel of laughs. Well, that's the pitch anyway. By tipping off the audience that this is just a big silly joke (however *Bloodsucking Freaks* – originally released as *The Inevitable Torture Show* – ends up relegating itself to the suburbs of sleaze). Jolly japes and knowing winks in a torture film are as welcome as a slug in a salad; and *Bloodsucking Freaks* not only winks, it also digs you in the ribs and gets on your nerves like *Monty Python's Mr. Nuthin*. It's a very early example of a trend that would spiral out of control in the 1980s, the shocking film that laughs at its own jokes, or feigns to puke at its own gross-outs (see *Troma Films*). As a result, despite its misogyny, sadism, etc. etc. it's oddly inoffensive. It so desperately wants to be the high watermark of bad taste that it loses out by fathoms. There's something smug and silly about the sadism on offer – the sexual brutality is so safely controlled by tongue-in-cheek humour that you long for the knives-out maliciousness of Zebedy Colt or Warren Davis. Whereas *Sex Wish* or *Sex Psycho* are both blackly hilarious and truly disturbing, *Bloodsucking Freaks* is 'Carry-On Torture' – a comedy sketch dragged out over eighty minutes. The lead actor provides the only fun, Seamus O'Brien as Sandu is wonderfully arch, delivering his lines with the epicurean relish of a depraved Kenneth Williams.²⁰

No, from the standpoint of the 1970s, depictions of sustained physical torture are surprisingly rare. They would only flourish into full flower in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Japanese took control of the concept with the shot-on-video *Zu Gimpaggu: Akuma No Jikken* aka *Gained Pig Devil's Experiment* (1985) by Hideshi Hino; the similarly monomaniacal *Akai Mushiutsu (Hells) Kondan No Kanojo Goma* aka *Red Room* (1999) by Daisuke Yamamoto; and the extraordinary cyberpunk horror film *Rubber's Love* (1996) by Shozin Fukai. But if the American Exploitation Independents were reluctant to get into torture, when it came to another brand of atrocity they were way ahead.



Robert Hammer's *Don't Answer the Phone* (1979) features a nasty bolton as the killer mockingly relating a victim's childhood trauma to present-day abusive daddy in a vicious

Pets (1972) was Raphael Nussbaumer's adaptation of three one-act plays by Richard Reich, which were first staged in Greenwich Village during 1969. The stories were 'Bash with a Knife' about a lesbian painter trying to rescue her very young girlfriend from paedophiles; 'The Silver-Grey Toy Poodle' in which two pretty hitch hikers abduct, humiliate and rob a middle aged man; and 'Peepshow' in which a liberated young woman goes home to her insane chauvinist who delights in his collection of caged animals, including a runaway girl. The film's poster art, however, as seen on this rare interview video, chose to emphasise only the latter scenario.



The Exploitation Independents

Rape

If one word sets the pulse of the exploitation addict then it's rape. Gore's exciting glimpses of erections and vulvas are fine for sightweeights and newcomers, but rape is the swooning & delicious truffle hidden in the room of exploitation cinema. Like the centipede's "black me" William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, it's both sickening and compulsively more-ish, carrying a charge of vicious fantasy excitement and the powerful aura of badness. If you want to explore that heart of darkness in seventies exploitation, you have to come to tents with the entertainment value of rape.

More murders are ten a penny in the movies, so mundane and overexposed that it's excruciatingly difficult to come up with a new and vital depiction. To kill, to extinguish a person's being, to take someone unwilling & to the very brink of life and then to push them into oblivion. It sounds terrible, but think again: it's the meat and two's of television, the burger and fries of cinema, the cheap plank of literature. No one raises an eyebrow – murder is okay. Rape on the other hand is still swathed in taboo. Only screen slaughter can be repeated *ad nauseam*, but add one graphic rape and you have a test case for audience morality. And as long as rape is considered to be a fate worse than death, this moral incongruity will remain unchallenged.

Rape is the unwanted, frequently violent, intrusion of one person into another. I would argue that this means the rape film belongs, if not entirely within the Body-Horror genre, then at least conjoined to it. The horror of rape is twofold: it's about the disgust factor of unwanted intimacy & it's about loss of control, the subversion of the victim's autonomy, and the terror that goes with it. Normal cognitive and sexual modes have to be re-set by arousal before we're willing to come into close contact with each other's fluids and organs – if a stranger in a café drools saliva on a slice of bread and then offers us a bite, most of us would find the idea of eating it repugnant. Real life rape is similarly characterized by disgust at the invasion of tactile boundaries. The second, psychological dimension is often worse after the fact, with victims feeling guilty for having participated in sexual behaviour abhorrent to them. Social responses to victims then compound the problem, as the words "son-of-a-bitch" "ruined" and "scared for life" unhelpfully surround discourses on rape and its aftermath.

But what makes rape so distressing is also what makes it so fascinating. It's the same with everything we reject. It's one of life's cautious instincts that there's a lure tucked away in that which we wish to avoid. It's an irony we're frequently indisposed to recognise – hence, Freud would say, neurosis. You may be wondering what all this has to do with rape in the movies. After all, when we talk about *Freaky the 13th* we don't feel obliged to debate the rights and wrongs of murder. The reason is that rape has been enshrined, fenced off, so that it becomes necessary to brandish a moral border-pass of real-world awareness papers all in order, before we can discuss the subject in its spectacular or formal cinema.

In terms of shock value and wilful offensiveness, there can be no denying the magnetism of a really explicit rape – not at this level of the industry. Sex and violence as David Cronenberg provocatively put it in an interview in Cannes to promote his film *A History of Violence*, go together "like bacon and eggs."¹¹ Rape fantasies bear witness to this – and to the way in which our sexual taste

are defined in the teeth of negative forces – bad parenting, social hypocrisies – which seek to construct, divert or deny sexual pleasure. Although you would never guess from the protestations of moral guardians, rape fantasies occur in both males and females, and they are common in a wide range of advanced cultures. Michael J. Hauer's *The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasies*, which discusses sexual fantasy as a psychologically antidote to unconscious desire, estimates that 24% of men and 36% of women have had a rape fantasy, adding that 10% of women report them as their favourite type. The cinema has always responded to the fantasy lives of its audience and, as the walls of taboo came tumbling down in the 1970s, the exploitation film industry was there to fulfil its part of the bargain. Rape fantasy was liberated from the illusion-heavy realm of mainstream cinema, with its "ravishment and bodily ripping" and allowed to appear in all its savagery onscreen.

A prominent title in any discussion of screen rape is *Spit on Your Grave* (1978), although it actually belongs to its own sub-category, being both extremely brutal and disturbing, and highly moral in its construction. The mawkish and irredeemable depictions of rape in film are the shorts or "loops" released to porno theatres during the 1970s, last no less than fifteen minutes maximum, and offering hardcore simulated sex attacks in isolation, with no narrative save the most basic of set-ups. These oft-repeated loops are the rape-horror film's *Degree Zero*, as they're about as far from cinematic and moral delectation as possible to get. A step up the ladder from these grim experiences are the rape-themed hardcore feature films. Those that push the boundaries of bad taste include the forced-meet shocker *Her Wilderness* (Lee Cooper, 1975) the race-war rape tale *Hot Summer in the City* (Gia Palmer, 1976) – which would have benefited from an street-life and less hanging out in a dismal shack. Shao Costello's aforementioned *Forced Entry* (1977), mind-boggling *Waterpower* (1977); and Zebedy Coit's horror-porn sleaze quartet, *The Farmer's Daughter*, *Terris's Revenge* (1976), *Sex Wish* (1976) and *Unwanted Lovers* (1977); some of the most diabolically honest products of American erotic cinema.

Borderline soft-X features like Jack Conrado's early *S. Francisco Bad* (1971), about three thugs who kidnap a hostage, but then rape, slice and bludgeon her to death before they can collect, take the rape-murder formula into overdrive, with a hail-to-the-wall ferocity that Ray William director of the simultaneously sleazy and unconvincing softcore rape flick *Strong Men* (1971) could only dream about. Williams proves, if nothing else, that having a penetrative gang rape scene go on for twenty minutes (nothing to increase its intensity). And rape would end a scene or two in any number of downbeat hardcores such as the blistering *Baby Rosemary* (Harold Pekar, 1976), the existentially gloomy *I Love You I Love You* (James Bryan, 1973) and countless others.

Rape involving male victims is unsurprisingly rare in exploitation. Zebedy Coit's films frequently is bisexual (certain as well as other, even more special, fantasy arenas such as incest and necrophilia), and his rape classic *Terris's Revenge*, about women hunting down rap and turning the tables, is as nasty and assaultive as you imagine from the man who made *Sex Wish*, but Coit's work is about as far out on a limb as anyone ever went. American sex-horror production, and he remains a benchmark for shot-on-film porno nastiness. Certainly it

And De Rency adds his fuel to the porno with the extraordinary tits and femmes de Sade

Waterpower

derotic rape forcing women to endure some horrors may find they're uncertain whether to laugh, vomit or masturbate

to all three simultaneously. The film was for many years believed to be the work of Gerard Damiano. The Devil in Miss Jones Deep Throat but despite advertising with his name on the credits Damiano has no defined involvement. Recent interviews have confirmed that it was in fact Costello who made the movie – something that fans of the similarly extreme opus *Forced Entry* will have been unsurprised to learn



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IN COLOR

ADULTS ONLY



▲ Part of video release of Ray A. White's *Wrong Way* (1971) changes resale amounts of money on eBay compared to the work of Zebedy Colt and Alex De Renzy. The film is a horror to their absurdist

completely eclipses AIP's idiotic *Rape Squad*. Bob Keljan (1974), another film about women's revenge for sexual assault that's so badly made you end up disliking the victims.

That's not the case with the electrifyingly nasty *Femmes de Sade* (dir. Alex De Renzy, 1976), in which one of the meanest, freakiest sex-maniacs in porno history (Ken Turner) rapes and bruises his way across San Francisco. We see him brutally raping his prison buddy's girl, after which he takes off to the red-light district, cajoling prostitutes into vicious, abusive sex. He looks pretty old – check out those pale fifty-something dugs – but he's supple with it, even demonstrating blowjob technique to a trembling hooker by sucking his own wang. However, it's a game of two halves, and Turner ends up trussed like a chicken at an S&M orgy he thought was just a joke – which it is, but the joke's on him. A gang of working girls, pissed off at his incessant attacks, subject him to anal rape, an unsolicited golden shower and the deposit of a chocolate treat that, let's just say, must have slipped from the dinner-table in Pasolini's *Salo*.

However, the doorway to excess through which De Renzy, Colt and others like them gamboned in the seventies was soon closed again in the eighties. The rape scene as spectacle of cruelty in American exploitation cinema hit the dust with porn's migration from cinema to videotape. The MPAA's stranglehold on film production in the early 1980s, the major studios' increasing dominance and the clean-up campaign inflicted upon sleazy bases like 42nd Street, meant that story-driven genre pictures were largely forced to abandon such extremes. Rape fantasies still turned up as grist to the porno-video mill in the ever more provocative 'gonzo porn' videos of Ron Black, Max Hardcore and others, but the slavistic intensity and gritty storytelling of the seventies theatrical releases were lost. Instead, rape joined cancer, paedophilia and drug-addiction as an 'issue-of-the-month' to be explored in lachrymose TV movies for the consolation of bored housewives.



▲ *Screamers in the City* (1976), directed by George A. Romero, shows the abduction and gang rape of a woman by a gang of would-be vampires. While nasty enough, the film lacks the visceral impact of the best of the genre.

It Came from the Stars/Swamp/Bushes/Caves (delete as appropriate)

Having travelled to the heart of darkness, exploitation-style we can now emerge refreshed to look at the more 'use-friendly' areas of the horror genre. The seventies and eighties were not *all* about extremes; horror continued offer what we might loosely call 'traditional' scares, and the Exploitation Independents were as willing to do so as the majors, albeit on a fraction of the budget. As ever, the mainstream success of this or that idea would suggest a number of variants. For every *Alien* and *Exorcist* there were scores of low-budget alternatives. Ghost stories, occultism and assorted supernatural manifestations account for a lot of what we're about to examine – but shambling to the front of the queue, leaving muddy footprints in the vestibule and chewing next door's dog, is the Monster Movie.

Monsters of the hairy, scaly or bug-eyed variety have always appealed to cinemagoers, and the seventies saw many a hulking terranathan stagger across the screen in America's drive-ins and handtops. Now, cheaply made monster movies can be a painful affair – but personally I have a lot of time for cheaply made monsters. They're a visible triumph of optimism over plausibility, and they're extremely charismatic, possessing an infectious charm that their expensive cousins lack. The only thing that hampers such a monster is the shyness of its creator, who often flinches from showing us what he's come up with. It's a shame, because a low-budget horror flick with a jaw-droppingly strange or unlikely monster has a charm that imprint itself on your memory for decades. The unforgettable apeman-with-space-helmet in *Robot Monster* (1953) for instance, keeps you glued to the set despite being possibly the least plausible alien menace ever created. Thank goodness Tucker had the courage of his convictions and gave us shot after shot of 'Ro-Ma ambulating implacably back and forth, tuning his 'b machine and carrying young ladies over his head and shoulders. If you *hate* your raggedy-ass monster and drag everything else out to compensate for the lack of it, the what could have been prime B-movie fun sinks like a plesiosaur's turd to the bottom of the Black Lagoon. Most of the inexpensive monster flicks covered in the review section of this book induce a see-sawing ambivalence between, as over-scripted tedium alternates with genuine weird prosthetic wonder.

The monster movie was pretty much born in the thirties (I'm excluding here such megastars as Frankenstein, Dracula and the Wolf Man), and many of the seven variants carried on where classics like *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) left off. The template was set early on: fearless lawmen, straight-arrow doctors and dedicated scientists battle space monsters on the rampage, journalists and local teenagers try to get to the truth, girls find themselves menaced just as they're about to go swimming. Affectionate revivals of the fifties approach, with seasoned gore to liven things up, became common in low-budget horror. Two Greydon Clark movies, *Withnail & Warnings* (1980) and *The Return* (1980), and two Don Doherty movies, *The Alien Factor* (1977) and *Nightmare* (1982), deserve special mention – Clark's for their exemplary B-movie energy and well-placed references to actors like Martin Landau, Jack Palance and Neville Brand, and Doherty's for their down-home settings and mind

gging monster designs. But the crown for this subgenre goes to a New Jersey-sensed wonder, *The Deadly Spawn* (McKeown, 1982), an exuberant interloper that is as often an alien invasion movie that delivers the ultimate in low-budget mayhem as likeable characters, gripping action (thanks by the way to the 'anooid'! If only the same could be said of most low-budgeted stoozers like *The Dark* (John Badham, 1978), which suffers from the curse of the workaday TV-movie feel.

Taking cues from the Black Lagoon's most famous talent are those movies depicting something nasty in the wood stirred into action either by falling meteors, like *Monster* (William R. Stromberg, 1977), or by human interference in the environment.

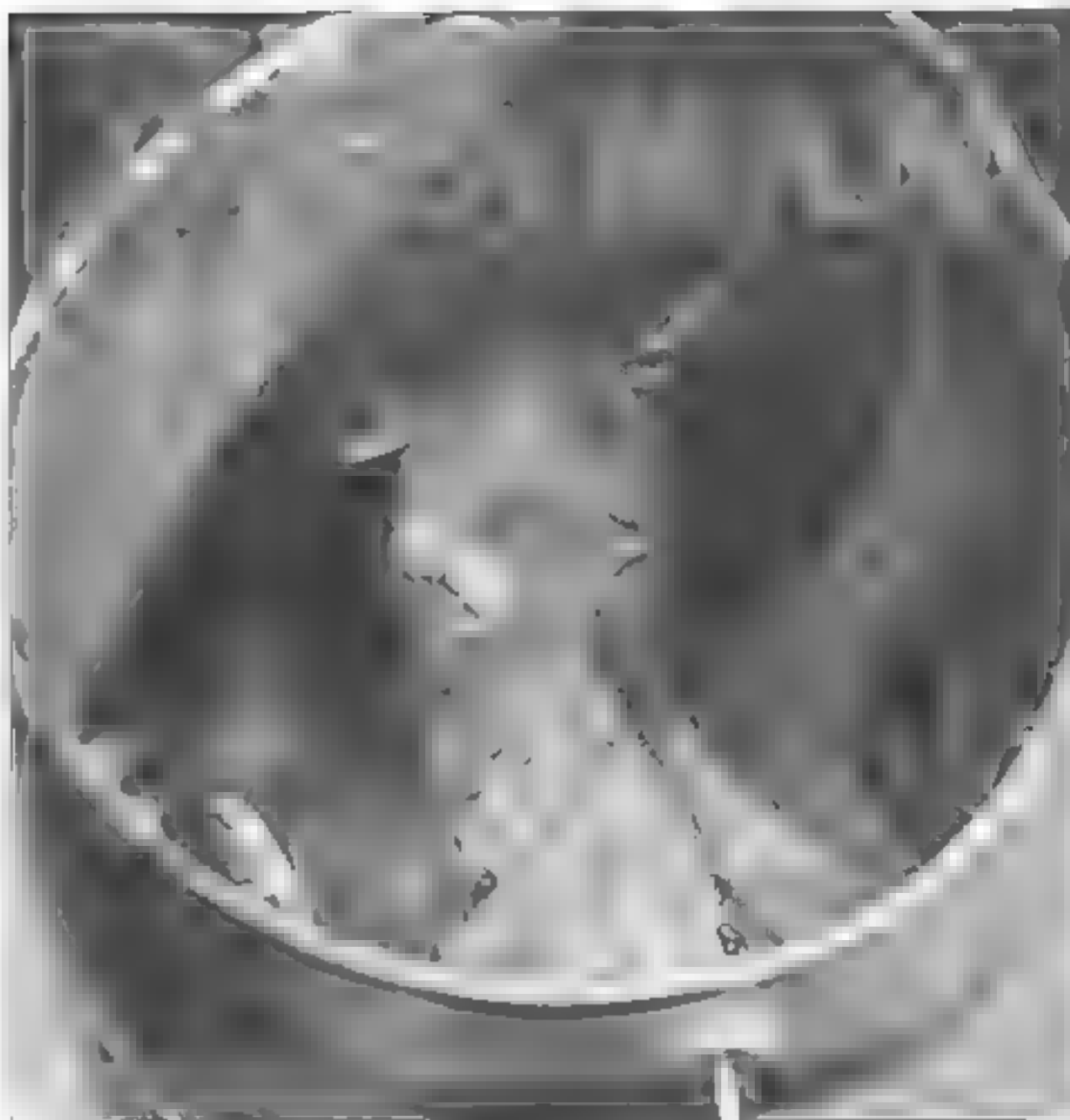
Contamination from a lakeside cement factory rouses the monstrous *Monstrold* (Kenneth Hurlbert & Herbert R. Brown, 1979), fishing with dynamite pisses off the swamp-bewelling rubber-fishbait in *Bog* (Don Keeslar, 1978); and *Spawn of the Sluths* (Stephen Traxler, 1977), the most educated of these movies, has a monster emerging from mutated sea-slime, revisiting nuclear worries in a present-day (the Three Mile Island accident was just a year away).

As with all genres, subgenres and sub-subgenres, there are exceptions, misfits and God-knows-Whats. A half-starved trucker runs amok in *Blood Freak* (Brad F. Snyder, 1979), for which drugs are to blame – and a full-on mutant cropus romps around in (you guessed it) *Octaman* (Harry Essex, 1971) – for which atomic radiation takes the rap.

Wolfheart (Richard Ashe, 1976) has a man turned into a monster by exposure to what can hardly have been the most threatening substance known to seventies cinema, a lump of moonrock, and *Runa: The Legend of Shadow Lake* (B. J. Rebane, 1981) can't decide whether the monster is an Indian demon or a horrendous mutant.

Interestingly demonstrating a sort of 'and now, local news' approach to the monster movie, a badly-tended municipal rubbish tip gestates *The Milpitas Monster* (Robert L. Burriel, 1979), a film made entirely by High School students and local community volunteers in the town of Milpitas, near San Francisco. (A. Also hailing from the San Francisco area, but operating on a far more complex level, is *Godmonster of Indian Flats* (Fredric Hobbs, 1973). This is a movie that owes as much to the idiosyncrasies of its uncategorisable director as it does to the horror genre, blending mythical allegory with California history, and topping it all off with a magnificently stubborn belief in its outrageous six-foot monster. New York's finest hour monster-wise came with *Basket Case* (1981), which asks what is a monster, and ends with a passing nod to *Freuds* (Tod Browning, 1932) suggests that there but for the grace of genes go you and I. Perhaps the most inexplicable monsters in low-budget horror are those stalking a handful of shipwrecked toffs in *Attack of the Beast Creatures* (Michael Stanley, 1983); since they resemble nothing more than tiny hand-puppets with stuck-on razor teeth it's hard to say whether they should be considered either as monsters or supernaturally animated marionettes – certainly the filmmaker isn't letting on, and the movie goes gallantly through the horror without a word about the nature of their attackers.

If you discount oceans, lakes and waterways as hiding places for your monster, then surely the next best location is a cave or abandoned mine. Caves have undergone a horror renaissance recently, with the highly successful British film *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005) wowing audiences on all sides of the Atlantic. Britain seems to do this sort of



thing very well: the long-running BBC TV series *Doctor Who* has made capital from caves and mines many times, with horrors such as a race of cave-dwelling reptile men in *The Silurians* (1970), giant maggots emerging from abandoned mineworks in *The Green Death* (1973), and the alien cavern domain of the Devil himself (possibly) in *The Satan Pit* (2006). There's something almost too perfect about a cave or mine setting: it's likely to stir up claustrophobia; it offers an environment with no reassuring physical markers; and for the Kristevans among us it resonates with deep unconscious connections to the pre-natal state. No wonder one of the best slank-and-slash films to follow in the footsteps of *Friday the 13th* was the Canadian *My Bloody Valentine* (George Mihalka, 1981), set in a mining town where the killer's activities eventually lure the requisite teen cast underground. Chief among the low-budget cave monster stories are *The Strangeness* (David Michael Hallman, 1980), which summons a believable cave complex in a garage-built set before revealing one of the best Lovecraftian monsters this side of *The Deadly Spawn*, and *The Boogens* (James L. Conway, 1982), a gripping little B movie that hides genuine scares behind a title that unfortunately sounds like a failed joke.

Of course there's no doubt that the home-grown, All-American star of the Monster Show is Bigfoot, the as-yet mythical hominid whose possible existence still excites imaginations across the United States. It's just a shame that this creature has so often failed to set the screen alight. *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (Charles B. Pierce, 1972), a Bigfoot

The Inevitable Octaman
Filmmaker Harry Essex and
winning effects men

One of two pre-cert UK video
enjoyable monster movies
The Strangeness



The Exploitation Independents

The Legend of Boggy Creek



The Legend of Boggy Creek

pseudo-docudrama, is the leader of the pack by a common rule. This widely distributed exploitation hit actually marshals some honest scares, first through its moody photography, and then by its use of 'fake' footage purporting to be the eye-witness testimony of real people. Twenty-five years later, *The Bear Hunt Project* (1999) would hit the big time by revisiting the stylistic innovations of Pierce's film and bolting them to Ruggero Deodato's 'lost film crew' idea from *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). *Boggy Creek* itself was followed by a dreadful sequel in 1977 by Tom (Mark of the Witch) Moore, and a third film, handily directed by Pierce in '85, that completely ignores the second. The only one is the only one to see it's a great piece of Southern exploitation ballyhoo that inspired the *Beetlejuice* out of children when it was unaccountably released to cinemas with a 'G' rating in the seventies. Of the others, *Creature from Black Lake* (Joy N Houck Jr., 1976) can hold its shaggy head up high as an actual kids' movie variant. *Shriek of the Mutilated* (1974) lacks the guts to live up to its magnificent title, but is a fun, low-budget and spectacularly over-the-top feature that will have you giggling after a few beers, and no whistle-stop tour of the subgenre can possibly ignore the astounding *Night of the Demon* (James Wesson, 1980), in which Bigfoot leaps aboard the explicit horror bandwagon with a penis-ripping vengeance. But as for the blurry footprints led by such tedious trampers as *The Beauties and the Beast* (Ray Nadeau, 1973), *Revenge of Bigfoot* (Harry Thomason, 1974), and *The Capture of Bigfoot* (Bill Rebuke, 1974) well, let's just say they're less likely to lead to cult re-

viewing.

America has a long-standing tradition of welcoming immigrant communities from the 'old world' and so it's not surprising that a few hardy, pioneering Transylvanians should have established themselves there over the years. As wrought by Bela Lugosi, Count Dracula enjoyed a bumpy period at the top of the monster hierarchy with *Dracula* (1931), but his star soon diminished in America until reduced to playing third fiddle (unbilled, yet) in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). For a few years, perhaps from shame, the Count slipped from view in American movies (finding solace for his wounds in the loving attentions of the British Hammer studio). Meanwhile, the family moniker was dragged through the dirt in TV comedy sketches, cereal commercials and kids' cartoons. A change of name, and a few hints that that's what it was, eventually saw a kind of renaissance when the American actor Robert Quarry, as *Count Yorgo*, romped (Bob Keljan, 1970) – stepped up to the plate. Here was Dracula updated for the me-generation, far from the Carpathian mountains or the drawing rooms of Hammer, and willing to mix it up with the gals-swingers and party pussycats of modern California. A sequel followed (*The Return of Count Yorgo*, Bob Keljan, 1971), but probably the most high-profile new arrival from the old country appeared in *The Night Stalker* (1972), a gripping, intelligent, and widely seen TV movie that had a Chandleresque reporter (Mr. Kolchak (Darren McGavin) hunting down a (surprisingly rusty) vampire in modern Las Vegas. It too was successful enough to inspire a sequel (*The Night Strangler*, 1973) in which the threat is a murderous immortal alchemist), and even extended to a short but fondly remembered TV series, *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, running from 1971 to 1975.

Eight episodes of *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* were penned by a talented young writer, and his is the future creator of TV mega-hit *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). Chase already had form when it came to the undead. He had written an unusual, low-budget, independent movie called *Grave of the Vampire* (John Hayes, 1972), in which a vampire rapes a young woman, who nine months later gives birth to his bloodsucking baby. *Grave of the Vampire* is a truly odd film, a one-off that morphs into an explicitly Oedipal battle between vampire father and abandoned vampire son. In the hands of John Hayes, an unsung talent of the Exploitation Independents, it perhaps lacks some of the bite of the more expensive (AIP-distributed) films like *Yorgo*, but it forgoes their borderline campiness too, and prefers to play the game straight-faced, leading to scenes that can give unsuspecting viewers quite a chill.

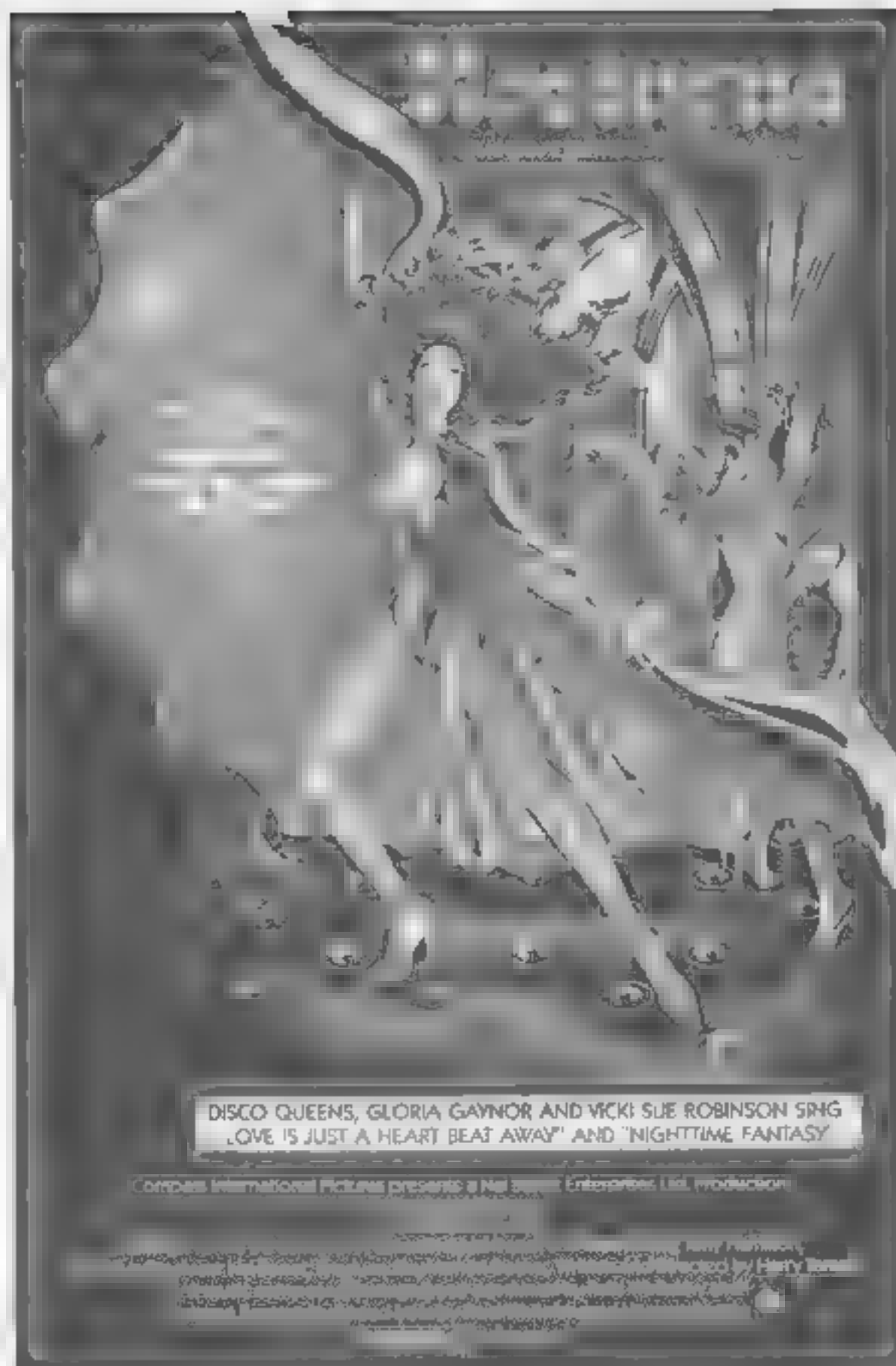
Leandra: A Child's Tale of the Supernatural (Kathleen Blackburn, 1973) also rings a number of highly original changes on by then rather trite vampire lore. Blackburn's genuine artistic talent largely unheeded at the time embraces the lesbian vampire theme so beloved of Hammer, but spins from it a bewitching fable: a young girl, a religious orthodox who meets a seductive vampiress that's more fairytale than sex fantasy. Fortunately a recent DVD release by Synapse has ensured that the film in its original lustrous hues has ensured that Blackburn's sole directorial outing joins *Herk Harvey's Carnival of Souls* (1962) as proof that it's always worth checking out the 'one-offs' of the genre.



So, once again, it's back to the roots of vampire cinema in the 1970s: Dracula himself changes his name to Count Dracula, adopts a camp persona obviously intended as a fitting disguise in California and idles around with voodoo in *Guess What Happened to Count Dracula?* (Laurence Merriek, 1970). Dracula's gay suits have busy fits in the ultra-obscure *Dracula (Jim Moss & Andy Milligan, 1973)*; a cursed bloodline creates vampires of the incoherent Florida Gothic *The Brides of Blood* (Robert R. White, 1972); Dracula's daughter marries the son of the Wolf Man and moves to Staten Island, where the unhappy couple raise man-eating plants in the frankly demented *Blood* (Andy Milligan, 1974); a satanic priest drags a brother and sister into incest and cannibalism in the loopy *Satan's Black Wedding* (Philip Miller [Nick Millard], 1975); vampires hit the disco in *Dracula: The Blood Sucker* (Harry L. Tarwitz, 1979) starring John Carradine as Dracula (maybe) and narcissistic actress Nan Buxton in the title role, and the dignitaries of a small town have a little fun in sucking the blood of road accident victims in *Dracula: The Blood Sucker* (Dominic Paris, 1979). While there's fun to be had with a few of these films (especially Milligan's *Blood*, which is a riot), they can hardly be said to preserve the dignity of the vampire mythos, and instead it fell to George Romero to deliver the coup de grace by demystifying the vampire completely in his superlative *Martin* (1976).



The Exploitation Independents



movie. *The Black Room* (Norman Thaddeus Vane & Eddy Kenner, 1981) got the ball rolling again with the introduction of a score to be popular notion, the vampire as slyish swinger, but it took the (unaccountable) commercial success of the fangs, fetish and fur shings item *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983), to relaunch the monster's mainstream career, followed by the re-imagining of vampires in three popular hits, the horror comedy *Fright Night* (Tom Holland, 1985), the gritty alternative culture infected *Near Dark* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987), and the glossy teen flick *The Lost Boys* (Joel Schumacher, 1987). Eventually, Dracula was fit enough for reinterpretation by one of Hollywood's big hitters, Francis Ford Coppola, who essayed the visual & amazing look, though completely unscary

vampires
Nocturnal (1979) hits the d

A member of Count Yorga's

THE OUTING

no one
ever returns
from this
phantom town
of TERROR!

Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992). More influential by far was Neel Jordan's screen adaptation of the best-selling Anne Rice novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), which dispensed with elegant old fiends like Christopher Lee and resold the mythos as a sensual pact between sexy young men (well, Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise).

Vampires, for all their "beyond-the-grave" stylings, retain drives, needs, obsessions, compulsions that the themselves *understand*, and that link them not to themselves but also to our bodies. Ghosts, on the other hand, lack this connection, and thus present difficulties of representation. A real ghost caught on film today would have a hard time not to look like a Photoshop joke – a pastiche of the cruder images of 19th-century spirit photographs and fake mediums and spirit witnesses attempted to convince

the other world's existence using crude photographic tricks and optical trickery. The photographic image of a ghost can never be believed, which is why the most successful ghost movies are those that suggest the ghost's existence rather than have a haunting these days when we have a photographic image of everything. It's a double-edged sword in getting the good press. If we can doubt the existence of a ghost, how can we believe in a man being belted by what chance has a phantom? None – not with our publicist, anyway. Your haunting profile can't be taken seriously, no matter how much you hear it. You can't be treated as real. Even the living can't be sure of their own existence, let alone the dead.

Unsettling visitations have been a mainstay of horror since their first literary stirrings in the medieval novel, and despite the seventies' onslaught of tales about murder and sadism, their unearthly cinematic offspring continued to pop up throughout the decade. How a ghost story needs, if not class, then a certain style – something that often eludes low-budget films. Perforce, because hauntings in the cinema depend a great deal on the credible reactions of actors, horror filmmakers couldn't get away with just a few flapping, cheap optical overlays. Often, what liberates low-budget films from the demands of mainstream moviemaking is their can dispense with quality acting (which is pretty expensive) and instead prioritize sensationalism, style, and sheer directorial fancy. That's not to say that acting doesn't help, or that it never surfaces, but making a slasher film or a bizarre horror you can get away without it. The ghost tale however rarely lends itself to "cheap-and-cheerful." Hauntings, with all their concomitant auras of doubt and uncertainty, are so much less visually sensational than murder, rape and mutilation, they require finesse, both in the acting and in the way the subtle gradations of light are deployed. Hauntings require much deliberation and co-ordination. To give the viewer that shiver of the uncanny, you must either trick your way to their nerve-endings by subtlety and misdirection, or take a psychological approach that sees the uncanny as a mental process. In both cases a considerable degree of caution, measurement, and insight are required.

Much as I admire the tenacity of Wisconsin's low-budget maestro Bill Rebane, his spook-story *The Demon Within* (1983) takes an intriguingly off-kilter idea (a haunted piano given as a centennial gift to an isolated community) – and fumbles it in a murky, plodding fashion that robs the story of impact. I would happily nominate *Hearse* (George Bowers, 1980) – a well-mounted ghost story rarely defended by critics – as a better film, despite



Joan Mitchell Jan White experiences
fears in George Romero's occult
Season of the Witch

the fact that it's fairly predictable. Lead actress Trish Van Devere plays the role of lonely middle-aged newcomer to a small rural town so well that you feel for her even as the director serves up plot developments as if from a checklist of haunted-house paraphernalia. *The Demons of Ludlow* is interesting only as a plucky low-budget endeavour. The *curse*, for all its imitations, works as a ghost story. And I extend my great admiration to those who try and fail to evoke the supernatural on a shoestring; this is one genre of horror that is probably best served by money.

Among the also-rans on the scary house market are *The House of Seven Corpses* (Paul Harrison, 1973) and *The House of Usher* (Gus Trikonis, 1978). Both films squander potentially intriguing ideas: in the first, a film crew shooting a horror movie in a genuinely haunted house are picked off by an evil force (an idea partially revisited in Norman J. Warren's 1980 B-horror classic, *Terror*), and in the second, an inner-city drug rehabilitation project relocates to a big house in the sticks, and exposes the druggies to demonic forces working within. Someone could still make a marvellous film from these simple set-ups, but there's a crippling lack of meta-drama in Harrison's film, and a lack of social edge to the Trikonis effort.

Another great premise – a haunted cinema – is screwed royally in *Movie House Massacre* (Alice Raley [Rick Sloane], 1984), in which the 'camp card' is played by a director who lacks the deftness of touch needed to bring it off. *Notas: The Reflection* (Jack Dunlap, 1983) surrounds its best ideas, a haunted desert town full of zombies, a mountain-demon with so much stodge meat that you have to be a genre completist (or film reviewer) to discover it, *Till Death* (Walter Stocker, 1974) ought to be, but isn't, a necrophobic poem, about a man visited by the ghost of his dead wife when he's accidentally locked in her tomb, and *The Outing* (Byronn Quisenberry, 1981), a painfully slow and inscrutable film set in an abandoned Wild West town, is so guarded about what's actually going on that I

don't know whether to dismiss it as the worst spook story ever told or to seek out an audience with its mysterious director. *Dark Even* (James Polasko, 1980) proves that class is in the eye of the beholder with a ghost story (admittedly enjoyable on a camp level) that's heavy on chaffon negligees and billowing curtains yet devoid of incident or atmosphere. But the best ghost stories in low-budget horror are those that innovate sideways into other regions. *The Forest* (Don Jones, 1981) takes what initially feels like a rural slasher and gradually imports ghosis both benevolent and vengeful. *Haunted* (Michael De Guefano, 1976) floats more ideas than it knows what to do with but at least keeps viewers on their toes with a weird mix of post-Hollywood melodrama à la Curtis Harrington, non-sequitur visual ideas, and a reincarnated Native American process. Without a doubt the most stylish and affecting of all ghost stories in this field is *Let's Scare Jessica To Death* (John Hancock, 1971), in which the heroine, recovering from a breakdown, encounters horrors at first indistinguishable from her own mental distortions. Hancock's nicely acted, beautifully shot and genuinely uncanny film stands as the best supernatural tale to be produced by the Exploitation Independents during the 1970s.

Swelling the ranks of the supernatural horror film, at least numerically, are those concerned with the occult. After the smash success of *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) and the even greater commercial and cultural impact of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), tales of sorcery and Satanism were, if you will, legion. Witches of a not especially threatening variety pop up in *Mark of the Witch* (Tom Moore, 1972), *Blood Orgy of the She Devils* (Ted V. Mikels, 1972), and the rather more readable *Madame Zenobia* (Eduardo Cerrano, 1973) and *Black Sabbath* (Brianne Murphy, 1972).

More complex and intelligent are *Simon, King of the Witches* (Bruce Kessler, 1971), *Season of the Witch* (George Romero, 1972), *Dark August* (Martin Goldman,

Andrew Price as
Simon, King of the Witches





The *Season of the Witch* (1972) – now better known for its association with the occult than for its depiction of the Salem witch trials.

1975), and *The Devilsville Terror* (Uli Lommel, 1983), films that actually engage with the phenomenon of witchcraft, either as a genuine belief-system or a cultural phenomenon. *Simon* is examined in detail in the review section; suffice to say here that it is an uncommonly even-handed engagement with occult ideology. *Season of the Witch* is from Romero's oft-decried slump period, post-*Night of the Living Dead* and pre-*Martin*. It does have some neat-cripping problems, not least a far too leisurely pace, and passages where forced scripting can have you grinding your knuckles against your teeth. The lead character, an unhappily married suburban housewife, is so emotionally reserved that many tend to dismiss the film for lacking a compelling lead presence. Personally I like it, but it's a close call. I suspect Romero, with his lead actress Jan White, was striving for a Bergmanesque portrait of emotional withdrawal comparable to Liv Ullmann in *Persona* (1966) or Harriet Andersson in *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) – a not-unlikely notion considering that in the early 1970s Bergman's films still commanded popular attention in the USA. However, what really makes *Season of the Witch* special is its commitment to the imagery of Joan's dreams as an index of her social and sexual anxieties, and its placing of occult beliefs within a larger framework that addresses female marginalisation in the patriarchal culture of the early seventies. *Dark August*, a lesser-known work that deserves to be seen more widely, is a serious-minded tale addressing the occult's appeal to the vengeful and is covered in more detail in the review section. *The Devilsville Terror* is likewise a thoughtful attempt to inject some sociological context into the 'scary witch' archetype, insisting, in a slightly mangled but sincere way, that witchcraft is a fair response by women to the patriarchal system. (I'll leave it to you to decide if this is a good or a bad thing.)

Judging from the porn mags of the 1970s, the idea of group sex was both gripping and appalled the collective imagination of 'squares', leading to all sorts of

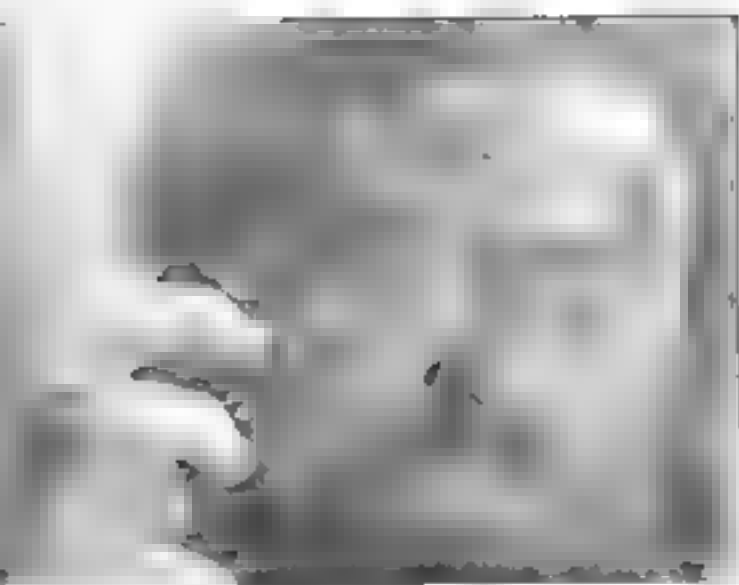
unconvincing screen depictions. Quite why group sex is so fascinating depends on how you view Protestant Catholic and Jewish notions of shame. To a Protestant, group sex is a sin because it's profligate, wasteful, grandiose, and of course Pagan. To Catholics, it's not only Pagan, it's also dirty, and if sex is dirty what could be dirtier than doing it in full view of others? Judaism has explicit laws against such behaviour, and besides, you might see a neighbour in a compromising position and then how are you going to face them over dinner next week? Ninety percent of what passes for Satanic occultism in the horror genre is satirically square society's attempt to visualize what it is they suspect 'sinners' are getting up to after lights-out, and by and large it's as unconvincing as their attempts to visualize heaven. Given that most Satanists are just Christians in drag, here 'rituals' are about as erotic as Sunday Service. Sacrifices in occult-horror cinema, for instance, are traditionally hypnotized or drugged, so we get none of the fervid struggling that enlivens the pitch for unbelieve- Satanic ritual cuts eroticism off at the knees, and maintains a staunchly serious air that would scarcely shame a Cardinal working his way through a Catechism.

Naturally happy to exploit an audience's prurient desire to watch 'sin' at work, porno-horror cinema frequently went for the occult-group-sex trip, but never with much success, perhaps a few lapsed Catholics were excited by the juxtaposition of quasi-religious holiness and bared breasts, but the Devil of desire rarely got a look in lust and true animal enjoyment are forever over the horizon. Frankly, group sex in such settings is a bore, a bunch of ostentatiously undressed squares cavorting in a poor imitation of abandon while some twit with a pictorial plays nursery rhymes backwards.

With the notable exception of David Cronenberg, sci-fi horror also accounts for little of worth in the Exploitation Independent field. Silly mad scientist motifs are garnished with mouldy horror in *Flesh Feast* (Bradford Maer, 1970), *The Possessed* (Charles Nazel, 1971), *Doctor Gore* (J.G. 'Put' Patterson, 1972), *Manston Doomed* (Michael Pataki, 1976), a mad doctor film has some schlocky energy, but can't leap high enough to escape the gravitational pull of *Les veils sans visage* (1959), the masterpiece from which it borrows its idea. An odour of Dr. Moreau and sundry other thistles offends fingers in the air like old cookery on *Frankenstein Island* (Jerry Warren, 1981). And speaking of cooking smells, given the current debates about GM foods, E-additives and nutritional standards, I suppose *The Grimyery* (Ted V. Mikels, 1971) takes on science-fiction

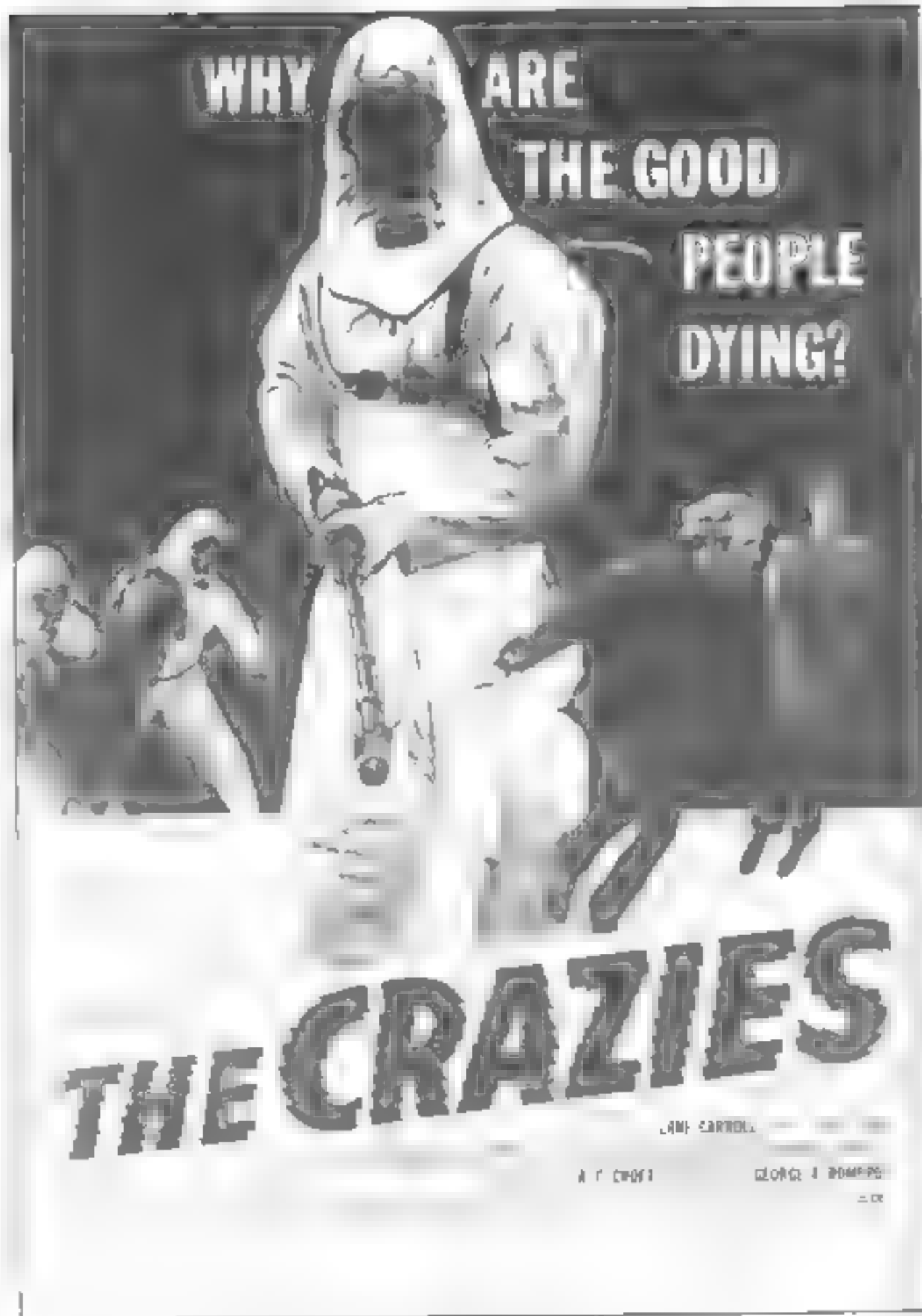


The *Body Shop* (1972) – now better known for its association with the occult than for its depiction of the Salem witch trials.



vertones in its expose of a company using human flesh in cat food manufacture—but I'm joking of course; it's a weird horror film really. Coming next in the list of horrors is *The Crazies* (George Romero, 1973), of which more in the review section. *Stigma* (David Darston, 1977) takes so much time to establish the scientific background of the redemptive of the old sci-fi horrors of the fifties to a less-than-cosy health warning across, and *Blue Sunshine* (Jeff Lieberman, 1977) enters Philip K. Dick terrain with a marvelously unsettling study of what happens to a bunch of one-time druggies, now firmly ensconced in normal life, who start losing their minds because of bad acid they all took back in the sixties. A vague for post-horror swept through the genre in the aftermath of *Carrie* (1976), interestingly, a few strange examples have been made. *Psychic Kitter* (Ray Danton, 1975) is a tolerably interesting example, although the more intriguing and complex *The Premonition* (1975), which also predates the *Panic* film, has the edge.

Rounding off his tour of monsterdom is the Zombie *Night of the Living Dead* was followed by such diverse American oddities as: *Messiah of Evil* (1973), a fantastically strange and mag native film touting a hippy prophet; *The Bad Seed* (1976), a horror story of a boy who came well before Romero's *Down*; the aforementioned *Wuthersham* (Bob Clark, 1972)—a *Monkey's Paw* in which a Vietnam soldier dies in combat, then returns home to resume his old life; *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (Alan Ormsby, 1972)—a tale about grave-robbing that starts out like a student film but turns surprisingly creepy; the awful but enduring *Garden of the Dead* (John Hayes, 1972)—with a long formaldehyde-adjuncted chthonic tale; *The Child* (Robert Voskanyan, 1976)—a dark horror masterpiece in which a nasty little girl uses psychic powers to terrorize her family and tutor before seducing them to her friends from the graveyard. A second wave came after Romero rekindled the zombie's office draw with *Down of the Dead*, as backwards as America provided occasions for a variety of ultra-budget spin-offs. Tony Malanowski's mind-bogglingly min-maxist *Night of Horror* (1981) and its genetic pulp-horror update *The Curse of the Screaming I* (1982) are explored in detail elsewhere in this book. *The Day It Came to Earth* (Harry Thomas Jr., 1978) features a Mafia boss revived from the dead by a ring meteor. Fred Olen Ray's inept but amusing *The Dead* (1980) is worth a look for its Florida swampy *Friend* (Don Dubler, 1980) is a rare example of



a post-*Down* zombie film that owes nothing to Romero with a reanimated cadaver, possessed by a demon, kills violin tutorials at Deepest Baltimore. *Night of the Zombies* (Joel M. Reed, 1981) meanders in a truly dismal way through a plot involving the CIA, Nazi zombies and a heroic commitment to nothingness. *The Dark Power* (Phil Smeigel, 1985) unleashes zombie Teller Indians and then shoehorns them into a Sorority slasher film. *Forest of Fear* (Chuck McClann, 1979) shows that living in Pittsburgh is no guarantee you can direct zombie flicks. The epically deranged *Evil in the Sky* (Frank Roach & Renee Hammon, 1981) has dead people stored in cryogenic suspension ordered to kill by radio control; and the action-schlock smorgasbord *Raw Force* (Edward D. Murphy, 1982) features cannibalistic monks who raise the dead.

Romero's *The Crazies* (1973) is a political punch that makes it a classic of the world-wide apocalypse. *Dawn of the Dead*

More shabby mayhem from Doctor Gore

films so *damaged*, so wonky and graceless and brilliant, that you feel a need for an an-ti-symiosis, where movies gain points for being *beyond* bad, for being truly incoherent. These are the films that fall between the cracks: too skewed and dishevelled to be hailed as art, too mind-bendingly weird to be patronised as kitsch. They hatch in the interstices between 'bad' and 'unique' – bearing in mind that the only *truly* bad film is a boring one – and 'unique' can just mean 'no one else would want to do this'. The terrain is one of dazed ambivalence, the appropriate attitude for the viewer stunned helplessness.

Here are preposterous stories told stonily, blankly, by terrified or medicated actors, though it's all disconcertingly real: here are plain-Jane heroines mumbling incomprehensible lines foiled by *ad hoc* editors cursed with a thought-disease unknown to man, following scripts written by the survivors of the senses, adrift on their own arrant scribble-dreams, wrecked on the shores of bloody-minded persistence, encouraged by camera-toting dope-head medians whose ectoplasmic smoke-dreams fail to show up on celluloid, despite achingly beautiful long shots invaded by human wrecking balls swinging lazily and destructively in the foreground. Here are sensitive self-taught actors giving it their utmost, pressed into service as straight men at the mercy of blood-clottingly inappropriate music, their spastic emotion-ellipses grazed upon by directorial idiot-savants grasping the profound by accident and squashing it into a messy insect pulp, exerting verbose professors of film theory.

It has often been said that 'bad' films overlap the surreal, although those who make this claim tend to refer back mainly to the black-and-white era. Let's not insist that the cinema of the 1970s and 1980s can contribute. I hope we can agree that a few astounding candidates are dotted throughout this book. Such filmmakers may stumble upon techniques normally associated with the *avant-garde*, while remaining stubbornly – or helplessly – cut off from the safe haven of art theory. A clever idea can be mired in mundane expression, and a senseless film can sometimes capture in fleeting form a penetrating truth. Buñuel is an example of a director who was unafraid of the most ludicrous notions because he intuited that in art deemed low and distasteful there were jewels of insight. There's nothing to stop the characters in *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) from leaving their dinner party – and yet they stay, befuddled by their relentless "sophistication". Similarly ludicrous notions crop up all the time in 'bad' movies, and it's as intriguing to encounter Doris Wishman in this mode as it is to confront the giants of surrealism: the only difference is self-consciousness, and since the surrealists were desperately seeking to evade rational thought, we can hardly be blamed for assessing those incapable of it just as favourably.

Rather than sneering at the perceived shortcomings of a low-budget film like, say, Wishman's *A Night To Remember* (1983) or John Wintergate's *Boarding House* (1982), perhaps a more illuminating, reasonable and enjoyable method of viewing is to imagine one is 'through' the pane of glass into a world where films are *meant* to look this way, where all the 'shortfalls' of technique are actually artistic achievements. Instead of being condescending to 'bad' movies – why not treat the errors and shortcomings as a sort of art-in-negative, where divergences from the norm, whether accidental or not, make up a parallel film universe? A place where tracking



shots are *supposed* to make the viewer observe and actors characteristically *refuse* to give even the basics of a plausible performance. It's by taking this trip to another world that we can really start to enjoy 'bad' films and also to discover their aesthetics. We need an imaginary grammar to account for movies in which a high concentration of ostensible failure – technical, logical, discursive – transcends mere kitsch.

The horror genre, it seems, has a special dispensation: it can get away with disorientation and incoherence under cover of the genre's habitual erosion of safe boundaries. The critic Verina Claessner once reviewed a Jess Franco film in the L.K.'s film journal *Monthly Film Bulletin* saying that it featured "chilly, robot-like actresses at an obvious loss". Such powerful words. 'Chilly, robot-like actresses' – who could resist such an image? Chilly, as in cold and forbidding. Robot-like, as in human but not human. 'At an obvious loss' meaning that these disturbing half-humans were somehow malfunctioning in a sort of automaton's graveyard. Marry such compelling evocations with a lack of dramatic focus that makes even a relatively simple plot hard to follow, and erratic editing that jitters nervously between the viewer and the action, and you have me in the palm of your hand. You are, in fact, Renee Harmon. Harmon's *Frozen Scream* is everything you could hope for from the words of Ms. Claessner – and more why: the chilliness is underlined by a plot that not only has actresses playing cold, manipulative, or distant characters,



Angus gives good Scrimm as The
in Don Coscarelli's indie horror
Phantasm 15

The man with the
Angus Melia in the
Soul Vengeance



Suzanna Love as the troubled Ophelia in
Jill Lommet's fractured he
Double Jeopardy



but also features cryogenic suspension. Ms. Harmon remains an inscrutable though gracious character (see interview), while co-director Frank Ruch has disappeared despite my best efforts, but I implore you to watch *Frail* or *Scream* again, and apply the 'looking glass' perception.

Obviously, low-budget films made by ambitious friends in California suburbs or Alabama back-yards can hardly aspire to a perfect match of thematic and imagery set dressing and art design go to the wall when you can barely afford film stock. In Italy, where steady subject matter is supported by establishment money, design is something even the cheaper flicks consider. Take a look at Joe D'Amato's brutal, often repellent 1979 horror film *Beyond the Darkness*: the interiors are beautiful, the locations well-chosen, camerawork surprising and creative. Examples from the USA such as *Lemora: Messiah of Evil* and *Martin* boast creative art direction without going to Cinecittà levels of indulgence: but more often than not American horror films are design-free zones, their principal visual charm arising from good locations. An American director like Frederick Friedel made his stylish and distinctive movies in a production context where tuition came in the form of a chat with the director of *Doctor Gore*, and where six months contact with the industry was considered sufficient to equip you with the skills to helm a feature. That this unschooled, unmoderated environment can produce truly extraordinary films like Friedel's *Lisa, Lisa (All)* or *The Kidnap Lover (Kidnapped Creed)* is a testament to the Exploitation Independent way of doing things.

Sadly the innocence, naïveté, freedom, self-obsession, blissful ignorance, call it what you will, of the Exploitation Independents was eroded and dissipated in the mid- 1980s. By the nineties, it was gone. Standardization, organisation, de-clawing, such was the effect that the majors exerted on the Exploitation Independents; first through their take-over of the business level, and then via the corruption of the B movie style by aggressive imitations of cash.

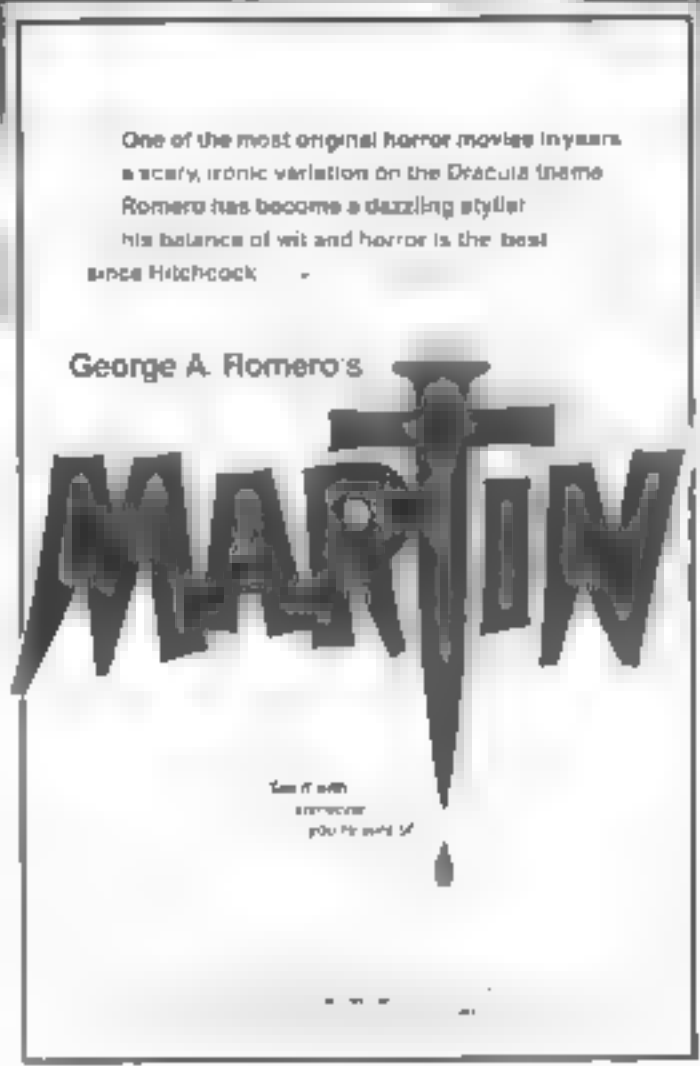
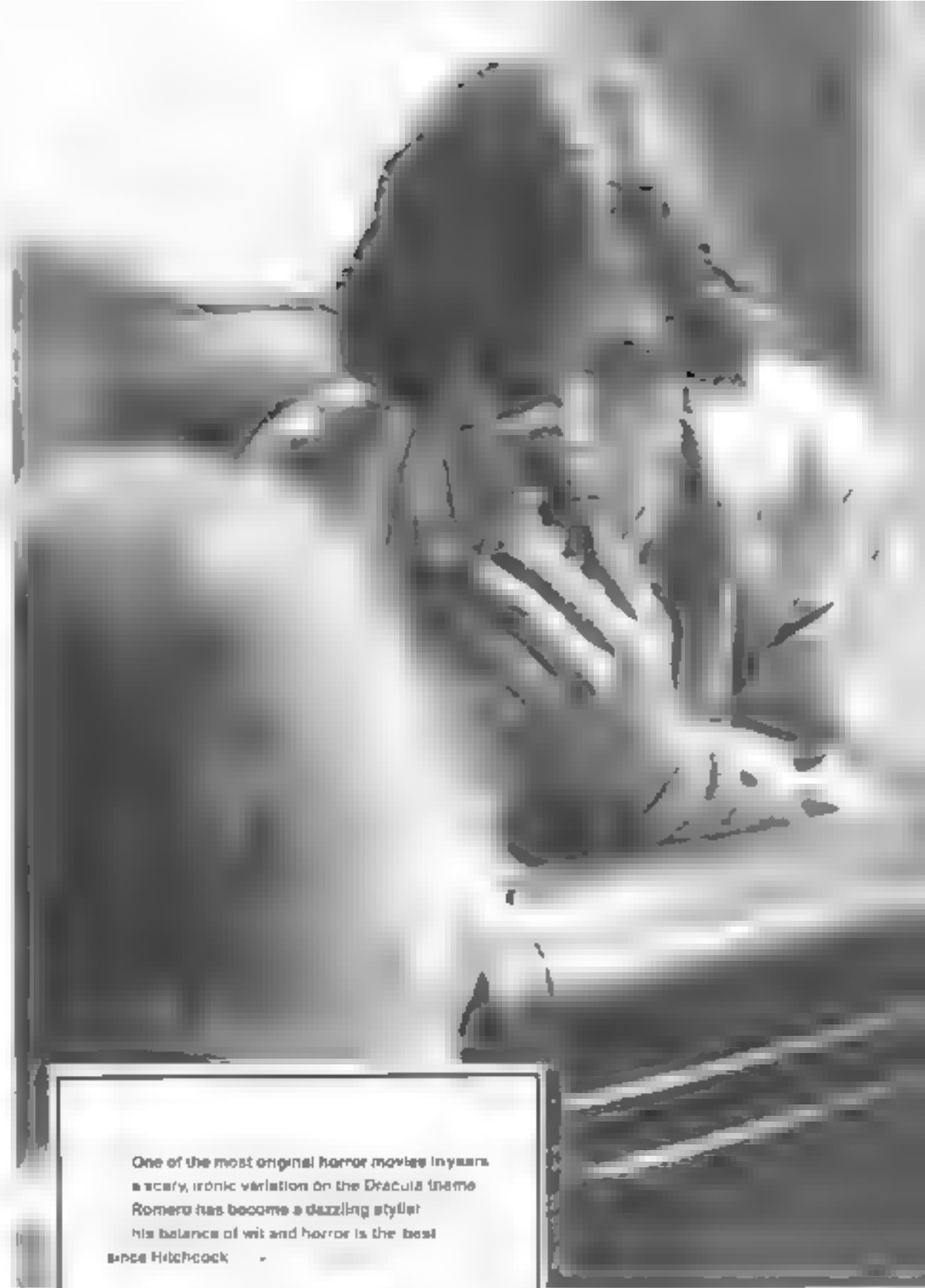
Decline – Carpenter, Hooper, Romero, Craven

In the 1980s, as the Exploitation Independents were locked out of theatres by block bookings of mainstream movies, the writing was on the wall. Investors drifted away as the majors tied up the money-bags and closed the loopholes. None then, of the leading players in the seventies' horror boom, only David Cronenberg has consistently parlayed his abilities into projects that reach the multiplexes. *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*, *eXistenZ*, *A History of Violence* or the heaunies (*Naked Lunch*, *Crash*). Others have not been so lucky.

John Carpenter, who after the massive commercial success of *Halloween* soon adapted to making studio pictures, is still a frequent visitor to the horror genre. Although his wonderful spook story *The Fog* (1980) has enjoyed a deserved reappraisal in recent years, his best work remains *The Thing* (1982) – a sci-fi horror, made at Universal, that may be the most morbid film ever produced by a major studio. Later efforts to return to the smaller more intimate B-movie scale of his early work, such as *Prince of Darkness* (1987), *They Live* (1988) and *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995) have their charms, but they struggle to simulate, and thus miss by miles, the effortless confidence of his early work.

The strangest and most prolonged decline befel Tobe Hooper, director of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

The Exploitation Independents



One of the most original horror movies in years
a scary, ironic variation on the Dracula theme
Romero has become a dazzling stylist
his balance of wit and horror is the best
since Hitchcock

George A. Romero's

MARTIN

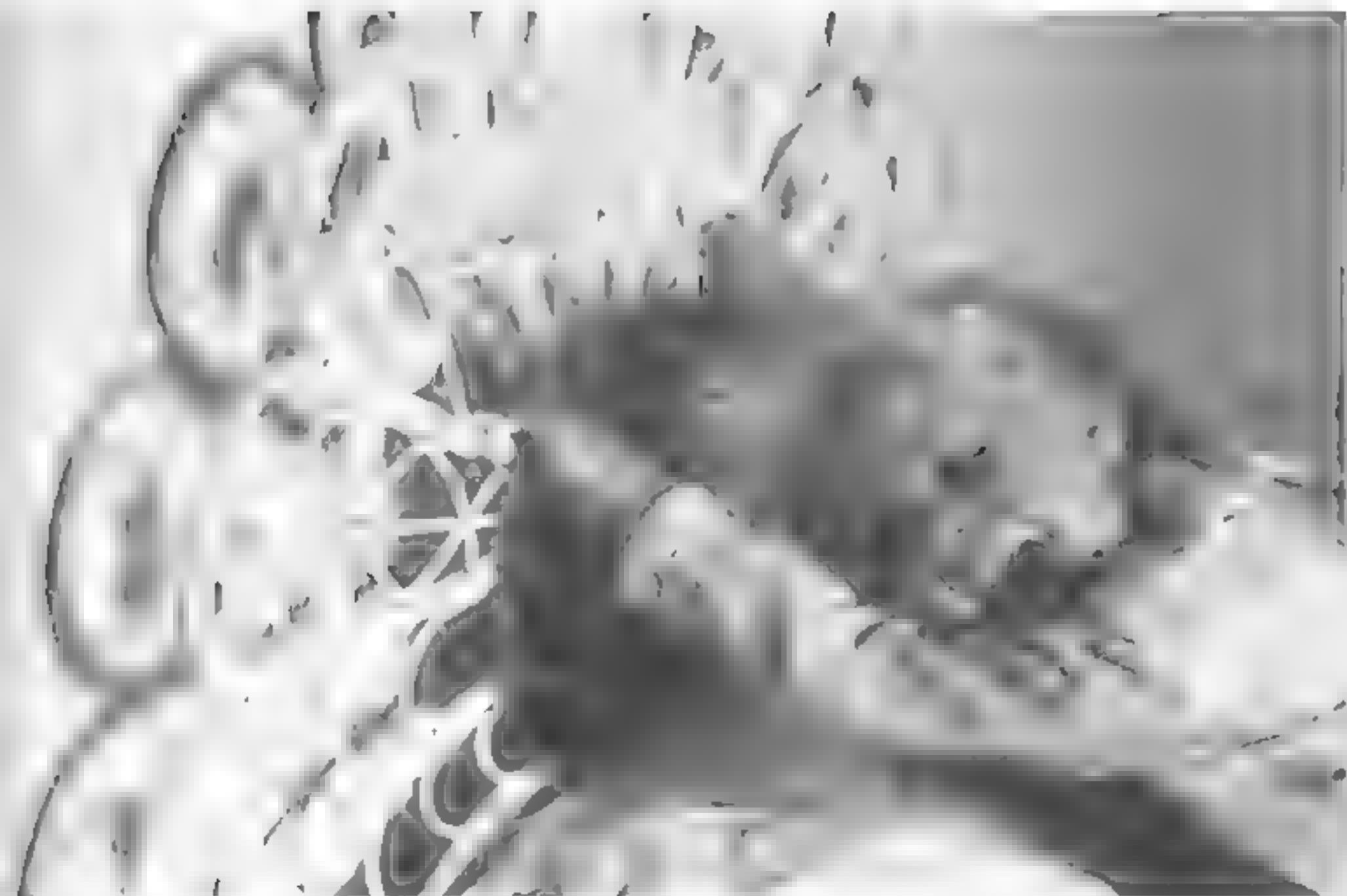
See it with
someone
you're sure of

From George Romero's Martin

During a supposed exorcism
Amplasy demonstrates the
Catholic remedies for vampire
temptation.

A simple but effective ad for the film

Monster or victim? Romero's
focus on the thought-processes of a teenage
killer made this a classic



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Like Orson Welles, Hooper made his one perfect film first (well, strictly second, after a rarely screened 1969 item named *Eggshells*) and was then seemingly ever after prone to production interference, acrimonious behind-the-scenes disagreements and questionable career choices. He suffered setbacks to the distribution arrangements of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, signing the rights over to the Malibu-run Bravstar Distributing, resulting in massive defrauding of the ticket receipts for that wildly successful movie. *Death Trap* (1976) suffered at the hands of producer Mardi Rustain, whose attitude to his *wunderkind* director was less than cordial. He was thrown off the productions of *The Dark* (1978), and *Kenom* (1981) after just a few days shooting. *Poltergeist* (1982) came out better than any other horror film of the 70s. For much of Hooper's career, the debt to the series *Satan's School for Girls* (1972) was a primary success, and probably played a big part in netting his most prestigious mainstream assignment, MGM's supernatural roller coaster, *Poltergeist* (1982). It looked as if Hooper was about to make the most effective margins-to-mainstream transition of all. However, during the shooting of *Poltergeist*, Hooper experienced difficulties with producer Steven Spielberg and the rumour mill went into overdrive claiming that Spielberg was taking the reins away from an out-of-his-depth Hooper and directing the movie himself. Spielberg took out a full-page ad in the trade paper *Variety* stating that he had every confidence in his director, but while this may have partially saved Hooper's reputation it

did not entirely quiet the stories, especially when the film as released looked and sounded far more like the work of Spielberg than Hooper. After this unpleasant experience, Hooper went on to strike a three-picture deal with Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, two Israeli producers who had clawed their way to the top of the industry heap in the early 1980s. In many ways it was the high watermark of his career as a bankable director, with two medium-budget sci-fi action films, *Lifeforce* (1985) and *Invasion from Mars* (1986), commissioned, along with *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre 2* (1986). Unfortunately, the results were a mixed bag. *Lifeforce* is a riot, but suffers from unintentional laughs and an uncertain tone. *Invasion* was just appalling and *Chain Saw 2* was a qualified success, in my opinion, but still failed to win over enough fans. For Hooper, the story thereafter was one of compromise, interference, and loss of focus, leading him eventually to the direct-to-DVD dungeon where recent efforts like *The Mangler* (1995) and *Crocodile* (2000) reside. Some have hailed his remake of *The Toolbox Murders* (2004) as a return to form. I honestly wish I could agree.

George Romero's decline is more insidious. The Pittsburgh-based director seems to have found it increasingly difficult to get projects bankrolled and, when he has, there have usually been gremlins in the works to prevent the films reaching an audience. Add this to a case of interesting concepts sunk by pedestrian direction, and you have another unhappy autumn for a once excellent director.

The rot began with the cheap and cheerful horror-whimsy of *Crepshow* (1982), a col laboration with Stephen King which failed to live up to the duo's breathless *Fangoria* promises of "the scariest film ever – you'll literally have to crawl out of the cinema!" King may have ruled the paperback racks, but he was less reliable as a screenwriter giving Romero a clutch of flimsy, lightweight tales to play with. Despite having fun with the coloured gels and comic-strip backdrops, Romero ended up with little more than a cute diversion. After *Day of the Dead* (1985), a grim masterpiece that nevertheless suffered significant pre-production hassles, Romero made *Monkey Shines* (1988), an unusual tale with strong performances and some impressive suspense sequences. Unfortunately it also suffers from a persistent "afternoon TV" vibe, thanks to a sedate shooting style and a bland, sensible score that sounds pilfered from an episode of *Quincy*. The same problem beset a return engagement with Italian titan Dario Argento. Having enjoyed cordial relations during the making of *Dawn of the Dead*, and substantial box-office too, the pair were keen to make lightning strike twice. The result was the diptych *Two Evil Eyes* (1990). Argento scored a qualified success with his half of the deal, turning several Poe stories into a curate's omelette that at least has a feel for the grotesque. Romero opted for *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* but allowed a "made-for-TV" aura to creep in again. Devoid of menace or atmosphere, Romero's part of the bargain displayed all the morbid psychological shading of *The Rockford Files – The Dark Half* (1993), another Stephen King adaptation, had its moments, but it was starting to look as if Romero was relying on the King brand name. *Brusier* (2000) at least marked Romero's return to self-written work, but it took a crackpot notion, embedded it in a mundane *mystery*, attached it to a tired revenge plot, and then threw in a few wild jabs of surreal allegory that failed to reach a target. It may well be the most frustrating and annoying film the director has ever made. Most recently, *Land of the Dead* (2005), saw Romero back in the mainstream with a fair but hardly epic new entry in his zombie mythos. As a director whose skill with character was always his best suit, he disappoints here with a corny super-villain and bland hero. By suggesting that the zombies are now the real locus of sympathy, yet neglecting to explore them in detail, he leaves us with a sketch of a movie, a hollow theoretical abstraction that must have looked good on paper but which fails to ignite onscreen. To make matters worse, recent interviews have shown a man uneasy with the excesses of his earlier work and retreating into a "what about the women" position that can only embarrass his admirers.

Wes Craven, on the other hand, has enjoyed perhaps the most unexpected career trajectory of all. If anyone leaving a screening of *The Last House on the Left* back in 1972 – or for that matter catching it on video in 1982 – had been accosted by a visitor from the future telling them that the man responsible would be a big wheel in 21st Century Hollywood, they'd have concluded that time travel rots the brain. *Last House* is one of the few films that is still beyond the pale for reappropriation into popular viewing; there's certainly no sign of it being screened in a Channel 4 'Cult Film' season, and it has been repeatedly denied a certificate for uncut re-release in the United Kingdom. If *Last House* wasn't enough of a barricade between Craven and the Hollywood Huns, a string of failed efforts afterwards should have kept him off Muthoi and for good

(rocks like *Death Blessing* (1981), *Swamp Thing* (1982), *The Hills Have Eyes 2* (1985), *Deadly Friend* (1986), and *Shocker* (1989) ought to have ensured that his Country Club card was forever marked visitor not resident. However, Craven was to demonstrate an amazing knack for pulling the occasional ace from the pack. *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) was a solid, effectively scary exploitation flick that toned down the excesses of *Last House* without castrating it, but it was the franchise-flaunting, culture-defining *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (1984) and the po-mo snarkfest *Scream* (1996) that clinched his reputation, both for fans and studio heads. To give the world Freddy Krueger and then to do the same zeit-geist again with *Scream*, another multi-sequel hit, is evidence of Craven's rare talent to read and even anticipate the mood and desires of the mass teen market.

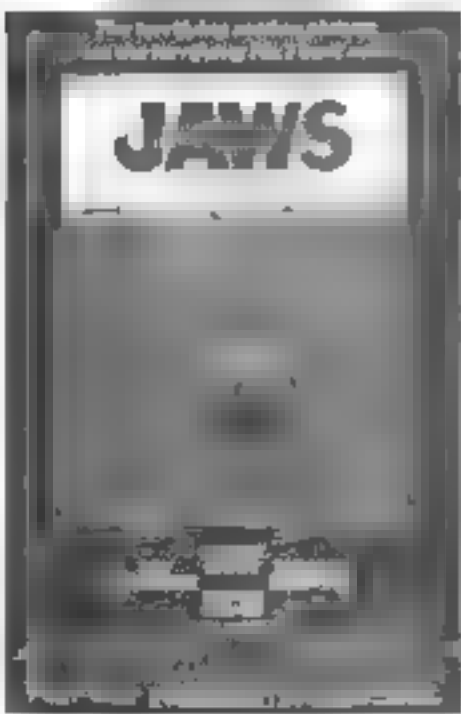
Hollywood Trash

An exploitation film is a motion picture in which the elements of plot and acting, become subordinate to elements that can be promoted. In that respect, I would regard Jurassic Park as the ultimate exploitation film. If you look at Jurassic Park with a cold-blooded eye, the acting level is junior high school. People read their lines as though they're seeing them on a TelePrompeter for the first time.

Herschel Gordon Lewis, to John McCarty, in *The Sexploitation*

The relationship between the majors and the independents changed forever with the advent of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and the runaway success of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). Gritty shocks and farground thrills were no longer the sole province of the Exploitation independents. Thirty years after Herschel Gordon Lewis assaulted the audience with the image of a woman's tongue yanked out of her gullet, Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) featured a scene in which a villain pulls a steaming human heart from a victim's chest (in a PG-certificated film, no less). From the kinetic virility of *Jurassic Park* (1993) to the portentously sober treatment of graphic violence in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and the barnstorming terror of *War of the Worlds* (2005), Hollywood's golden boy has consistently used his position at the top of the tree to indulge his childhood love of B-movie shocks.

Brian De Palma has wrought a series of films that play as stylish variations on B-movie formats, decked out with copious film allusions (most notoriously to Hitchcock) and Byzantine explorations of the voyeuristic urge. When De Palma tips a bucket of pig's blood over the radiant Carrie White, queen of the prom for a few brief seconds, it's fair to say that the director of *Blood Feast* has been trumped. Films like *Friday the 13th*, initially an independent production but swiftly bought up for distribution by Paramount, added the requisite flesh wounds and one-on-one carnage, and the majors were at last playing the game as bloodthirsty as the independents. And so came the backlash. By taking this overt slashing and maiming into the wider arena of mainstream cinema, with its TV and newspaper advertising and hardtop blanket releases, the producers courted an emasculation of the rude energy they were exploiting. The fate of *Friday the 13th Part 2* is a case in point. It was another enjoyable romp through the woods with plenty of tension and a few startling moments of





erminence and sublime bad taste exhibited Lewis leads a lifetime

re-view's Rejects

are, and can blame them? That's what we are here to do too. And yet a self-

entirely as material is now reference and discussion, homage and pastiche. That's just the way it is in this postmodern world, no way out. So at least we can still enjoy films like *Two Thousand Maniacs!* or *The Gruesome Twosome*. Lewis was vaulting into self-parody before anyone else had even lapped the straight-faced approach to butchery!



violence, but the film had to be severely watered-down before release – grisly killings shown via production stills in America's gore-film bible *Fangoria* were never to emerge intact in the cinema, and even today the missing scenes have not been re-insured on DVD. Dedicated *Fangoria* readers in the early eighties grew ever more wearily disappointed as optimistic on-set reports promising grisly special prosthetic effects were contradicted as mutilated after neutered mutil hit the cinemas, between the *Fangoria* picture-spreads and the actual release, the MPAA insisted that oodles of nastiness be removed to secure an 'R' rating. This, not to put too fine a point on it, is how cheese-wire was looped around the nuts of the genre. The majors were willing to get their hands a *little* bit dirty with the disreputable but lucrative slashers, but they absolutely insisted on an 'R' rating, without which their advertising would be short of its traditional avenues. Newspapers mostly refused to run an ad for an unrated film, and major TV stations would refuse a trailer. Although it was technically possible to release a film without the MPAA-approved 'R', restricted advertising was a real drawback. Sadly, most people mistook unrated films for 'X' films, in other words, pornography. The resultant stigma was enough to scare off newspaper ad departments, offend those with a will to be offended, and painify studio bosses. In marketing terms, the freedom to go unrated was the freedom to go fuck yourself.

The *Friday the 13th* series, probably the lynch-pin deal between mainstream cinema and the Exploitation independents, turned out to be a genuine cash cow for Paramount – but in getting their corporate fingerprints all

made the series distant. *Friday the 13th* was less violent, less gory, and less satisfying, and watching the latest effort was like visiting an old friend who used to be a live wire but who lately spends his days doped up on Prozac. There's a genuinely poignant moment in *Jason X* (2001), one of New Line's additions to the franchise, when Jason – now an immortal monster attacking teens in outer space – wanders onto a holodeck programmed to simulate his earliest killing grounds. The scene plays wistfully even affectionately, with the early format, but of course the holographic image is part of the intended victim's self-defence, the emphasis having long ago shifted to survival and resistance – cosy reassurances that 'we' can cope. Horror becomes an exercise in problem-solving, a can-do lecture in which those who die are tainted as losers, and the survivors are those who deserve to live. Such was the gift the 1980s gave to horror – and *Jason X* is very funny, it's a world away from the Exploitation Independent roots of the series but it keeps the faith in a handful of nasty scenes, and for a while you visit, as if in a dream, the grisly days of yore when studio squeamishness and misguided sexual politics did not demand that the killer be a joke or a schmock, defeated *a priori*. When the only survivor was there to keep the sequel open, not to empower the viewer.

Genres wax and wane, and in this respect the horror genre is like any other. The phenomenal explosion of activity in the '90s was bound to end sooner or later. It's just a shame that the industry has been restructured so profoundly that a cheap, gritty, artfully odd or endearing off-beam horror film stands little chance of reaching movie screens. There are occasional exceptions, but they basically prove the rule. The Exploitation Independents are a historical category now, and it's hard to see how a similar

blend of market conditions and creative forces could ever be repeated. It's only through video, DVD, and the obsession of fans that these movies survive today. And like FM radio, where the same 'golden oldies' are peddled from a play-list that ignores 95% of the past, it's easy to let the modern entertainment machine push these all-too-human oddities, these rough gems of the awkward squad out of the picture. It's called airbrushing, and it's a mild but insidious form of fascism. *Nightmare USA*, with its cavalcade of perversions and imperfections, is my beacon for those films and filmmakers either avoided, disrespected, forgotten or ignored by all, but the most dedicated fan discourse. Not in the name of art, not to ennoble a new list of greats, but for variance, diversity, strangeness – and all the pleasures they can bring.

¹ From John McCarty's *The Sleaze Merchants*, p.69

² *The Sleaze Merchants*, p.41

³ All Romero quotes are from *The Zombies That Ate Pittsburgh*, Paul R. Gagne, pub. Dodo, Meade and Co., 1987

⁴ Figures courtesy of www.driventheater.com

⁵ Los Angeles was the West Coast Mecca for sleaze movie far less iconic than New York's Drive-In but still a major exhibition revenue for the Exploitation Independents. James Brown, L.A.-based director of *Don't Go in the Woods* (1981), described the city's exhibition circuit: 'The L.A. movie dealer scene in the seventies pre-mall Cinemex era centred on Hollywood Blvd. and Sunset Blvd. in Hollywood, and to some extent Westwood Village (CUL) and Beverly Hills along Wilshire Blvd. That's where the big films had their opening engagements. Downtown L.A. was home to the Grandhouses that were once the Movie Palace churches (Million Dollar and Mayan and others). The city of Hollywood saw the invasion of the grindhouse policy, as did Cinemplexes began developing around outlying L.A. The major revival house was the Cinema on Western at Santa Monica Blvd. While numerous other revival houses were springing up in the early seventies the beginning of the VHS revolution closed most of them down just as quickly. There are a few struggling on now; the last one still going strong is the New Beverly on Beverly Blvd. in La Brea. The most likely reason for this long healthy and wildly successful Grandhouse Film Festival presented by Curdin and Brian Quinn once a month at the grand old New Beverly.

⁶ *Sleazoid Express*, Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford, Fireside-Simon & Schuster, 2001

The Sleaze Merchants, p.173

⁸ *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, Chris Rodley, Faber & Faber

⁹ Perhaps I'm getting a little peculiar in my old age

¹⁰ Spoiler: say, O'Brien was stabbed to death soon after making movie, killed in his home on 4 May 1977 while crying in bed.

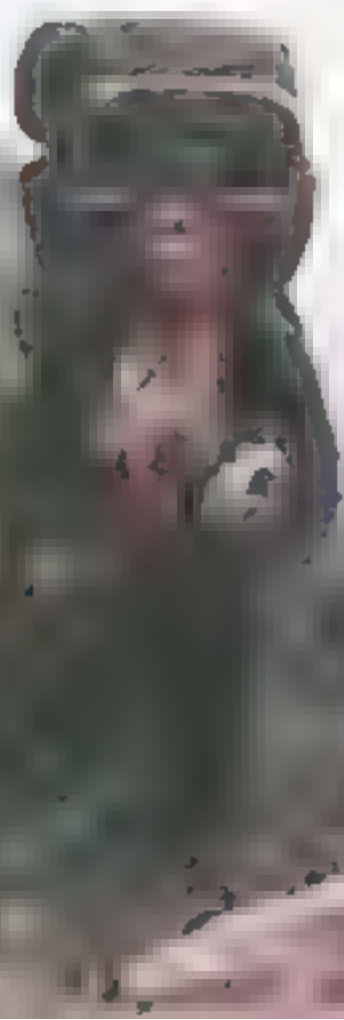
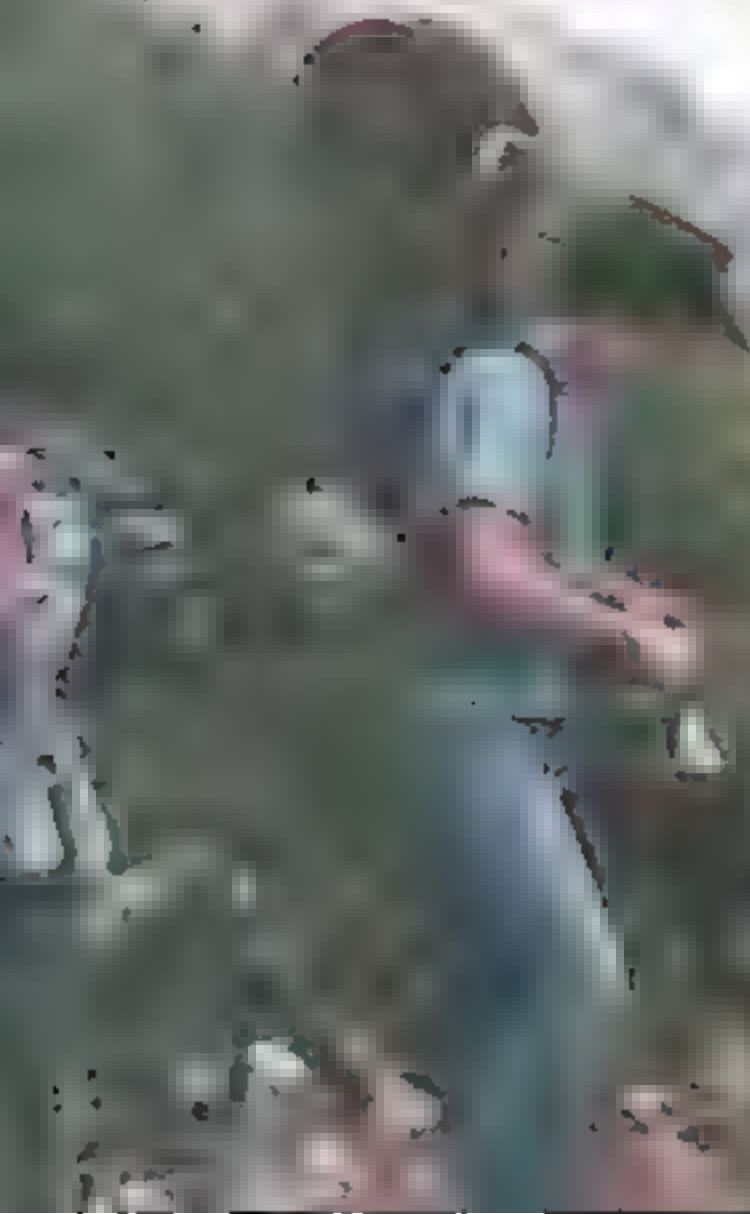
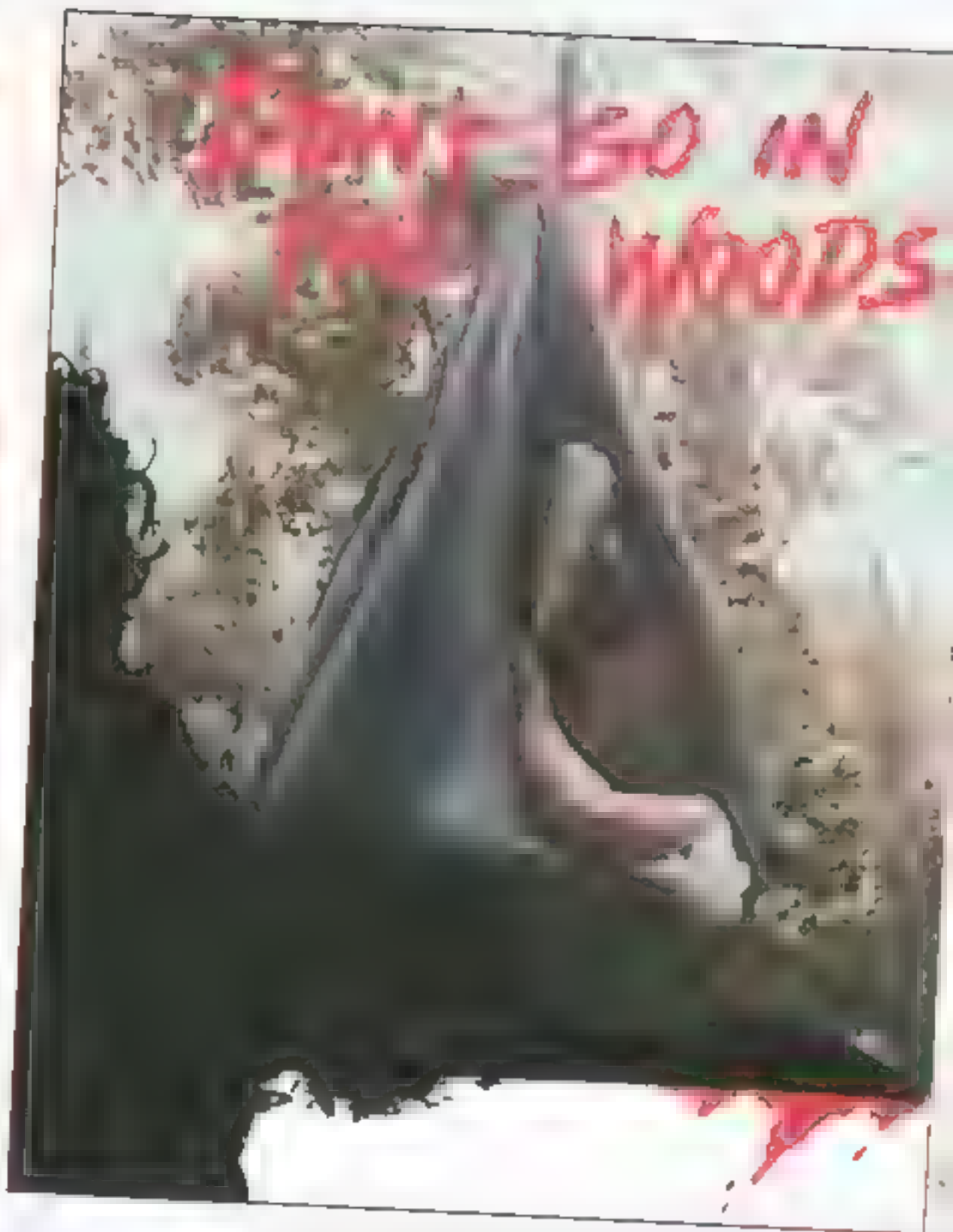
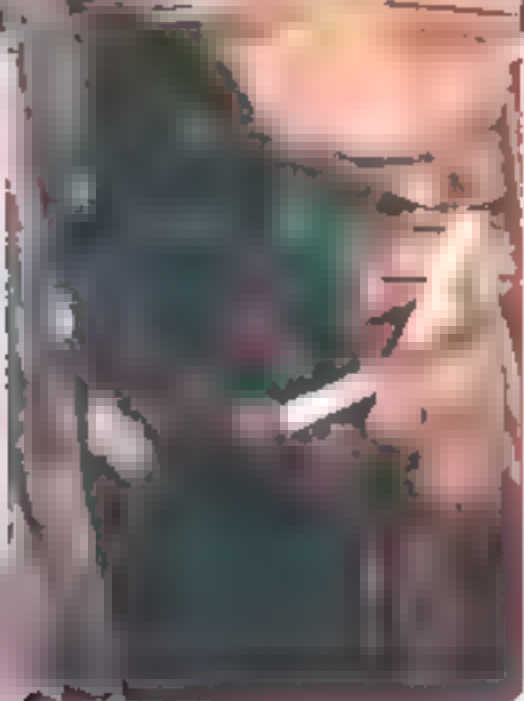
¹¹ See the British DVD extras



but once will be enough

FRIDAY THE 13TH



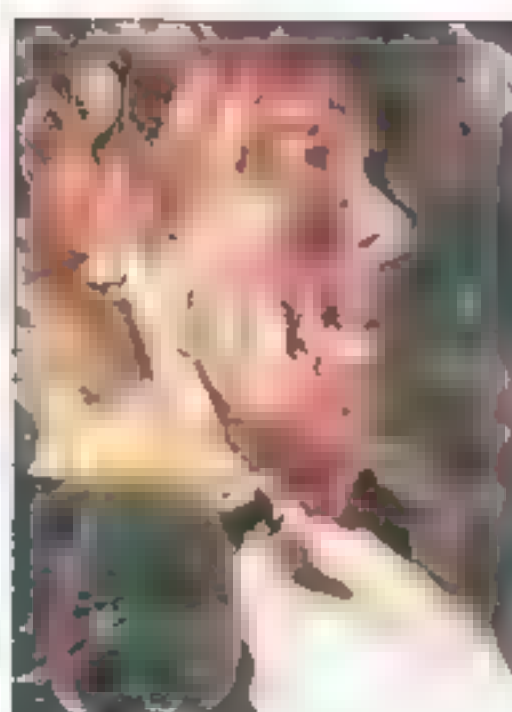
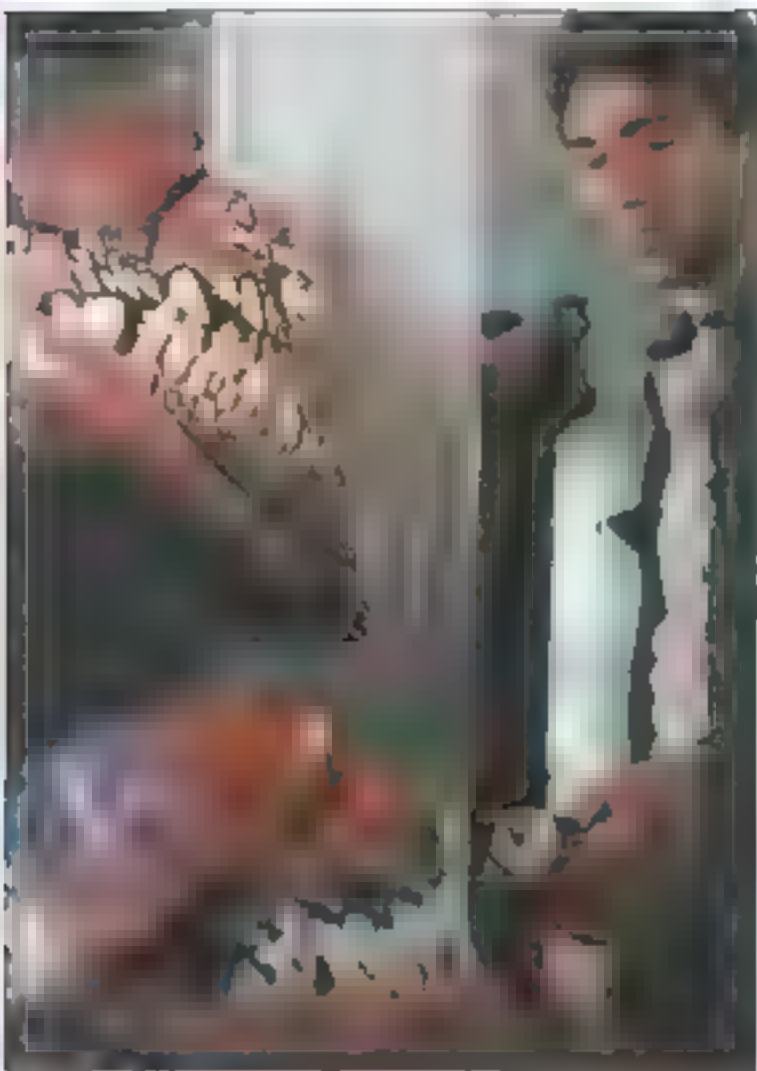


KIDNAPPED COED



... who
wanted the
ransom— UNTIL YOU
SAW HER!

Starring JACK CANON LESLIE ANN RIVERS
GLADYS LAVITAN LARRY LAMBETH JIM BLANK NSFFP Written, Produced and
Directed by FREDERICK W. FRIDEL Executive Producer: RYAN FRIEDLANDER R. RESTRICTED
IN COLOR A BOXOFFICE INTERNATIONAL PICTURES Release

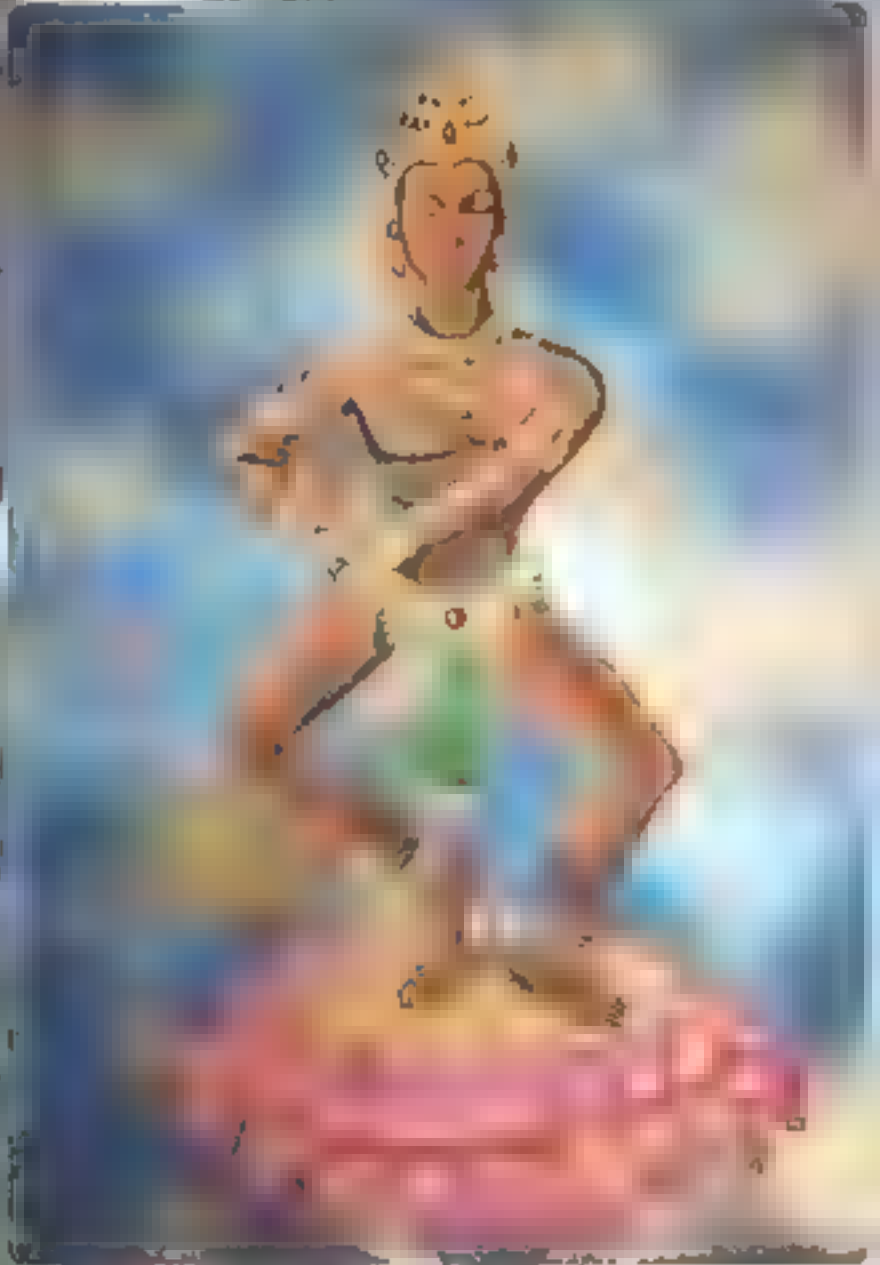


episode
 Distributor Harry Newak
 Frederic The Kidnap Lover
 as Kidnapped Coed and the
 quintessential table-top work

 this page from 1972
 The Deadly Spawn 98
 Joseph Joseph M. McGowan
 creature between takes
 Japanese pressbook for the film
 Barbara B. 1938 well suffers a lot
 in the basement
 More fantastic pressbook art

THEY CAME TO EARTH IN A NETWORK
 AS TINY ORGANIC SPORES
 BUT AS THEY GREW,
 they wanted to do only one thing
 (EAT)



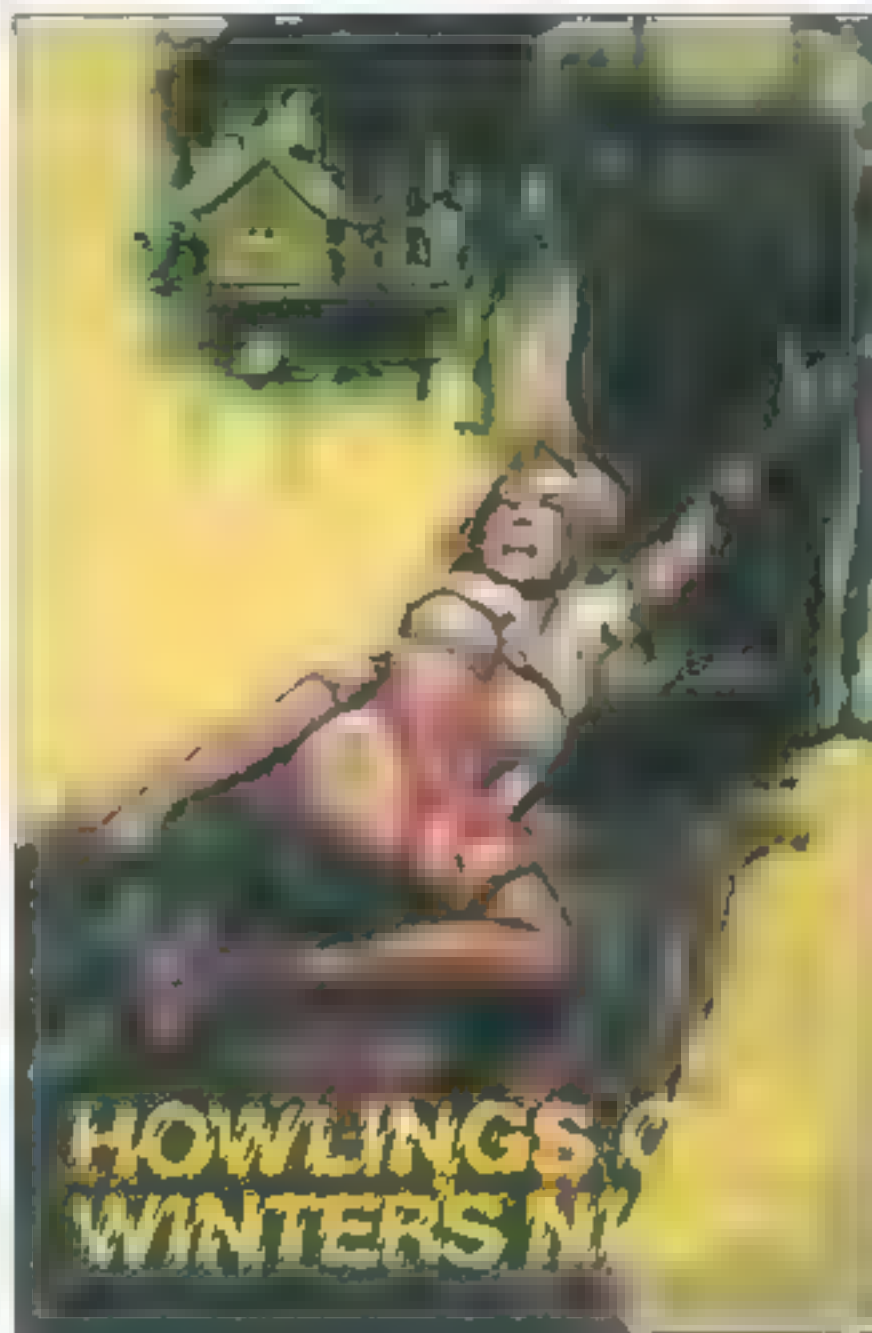
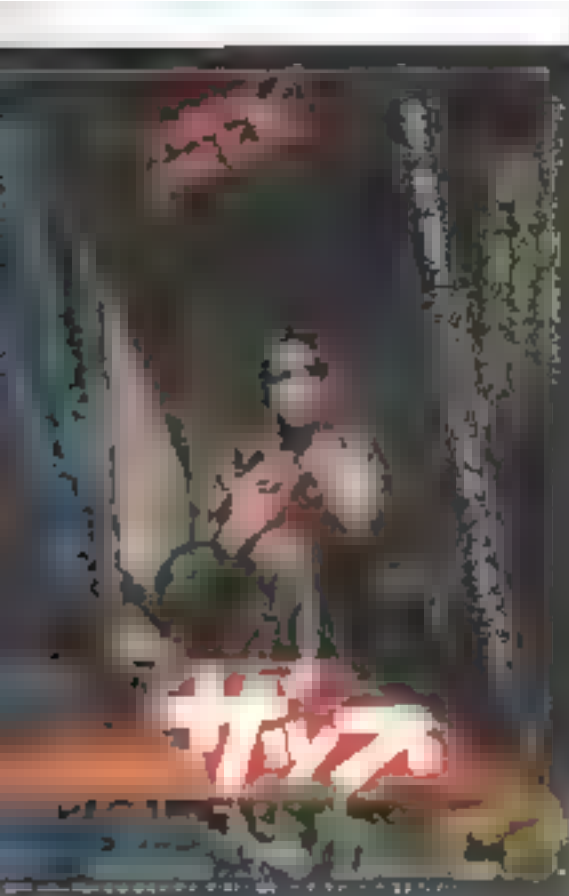


Top page clockwise from top

David Quixten demonstrating his strict directorial style on I Drink Your Blood

A flyer for one of Bhaskar's dance spectacles

Bhaskar as Horace Bones with friend



the page clockwise from top left: **Drink Your Blood** (27)

An infected construction worker brandishes the severed head of his old friend while the cranky, RNC-loving, Putin-loving, right-looks-or-greatly-Japanese cross-dresser in the unit resembling Lynn Collins (ylvia Ins Brooks, the rapid nympho) — a construction-worker's nightmare.

above: James Wisor's low-budget portmanteau horror **Screams of a Winter Night** (9/4) became **Howlings of a Winter's Night** for this Australian video release



This page: *Don't Go in the House* (1979) was initially marketed under the title *The Burning* (left) when an early DVD version

appeared. The fiery climax as Donny Dan Smalder is set upon by vengeful zombies

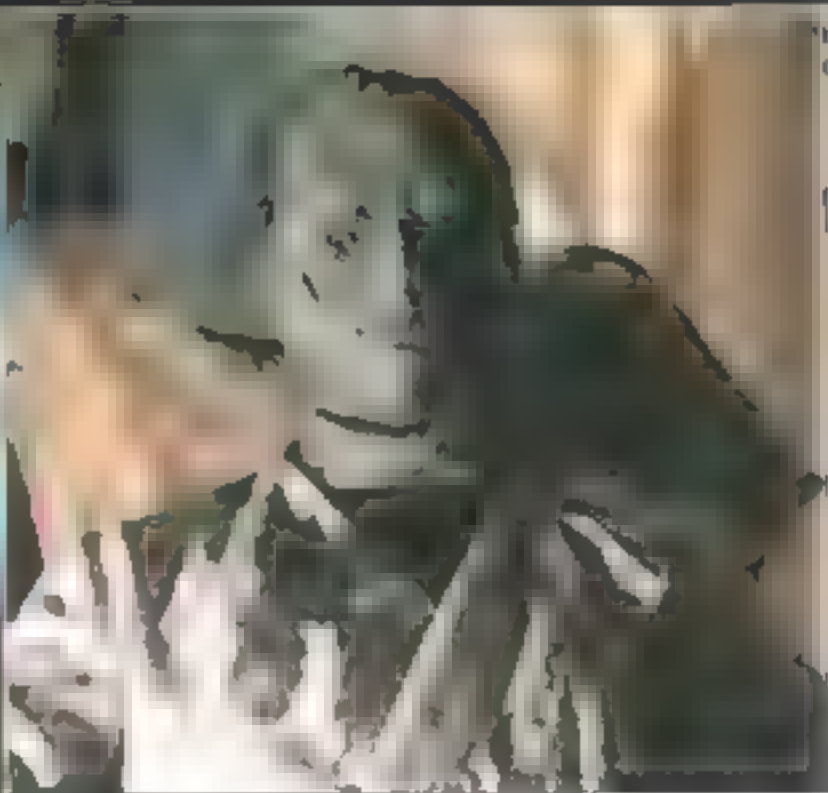
before Disco Inferno. The appropriately-colored Harrah (Nikki Lattin) goes up in flames during a fire





THE BURNING

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Don't Go in the House
The burning of Kathy Jordan (Debra R. Arnold) is shown in a close-up, and the person in the chair (bottom left) which has been shown in a close-up is shown in an armchair with Denny's other victims (bottom right).

Great promotional artwork for David Michael Haman's special
production (aka) **The Strangeness** (aka)

THE STRANGENESS

IT'LL GROW ON YOU

Starring

James Van Der Beek, Michael Rosenbaum, Michael E. Knight, Michael C. Hall, Michael J. Gough, Michael J. Fox, Michael J. Smith, Michael J. Tabor

Co-starring

James Van Der Beek, Michael Rosenbaum, Michael E. Knight, Michael C. Hall, Michael J. Gough, Michael J. Fox, Michael J. Smith, Michael J. Tabor

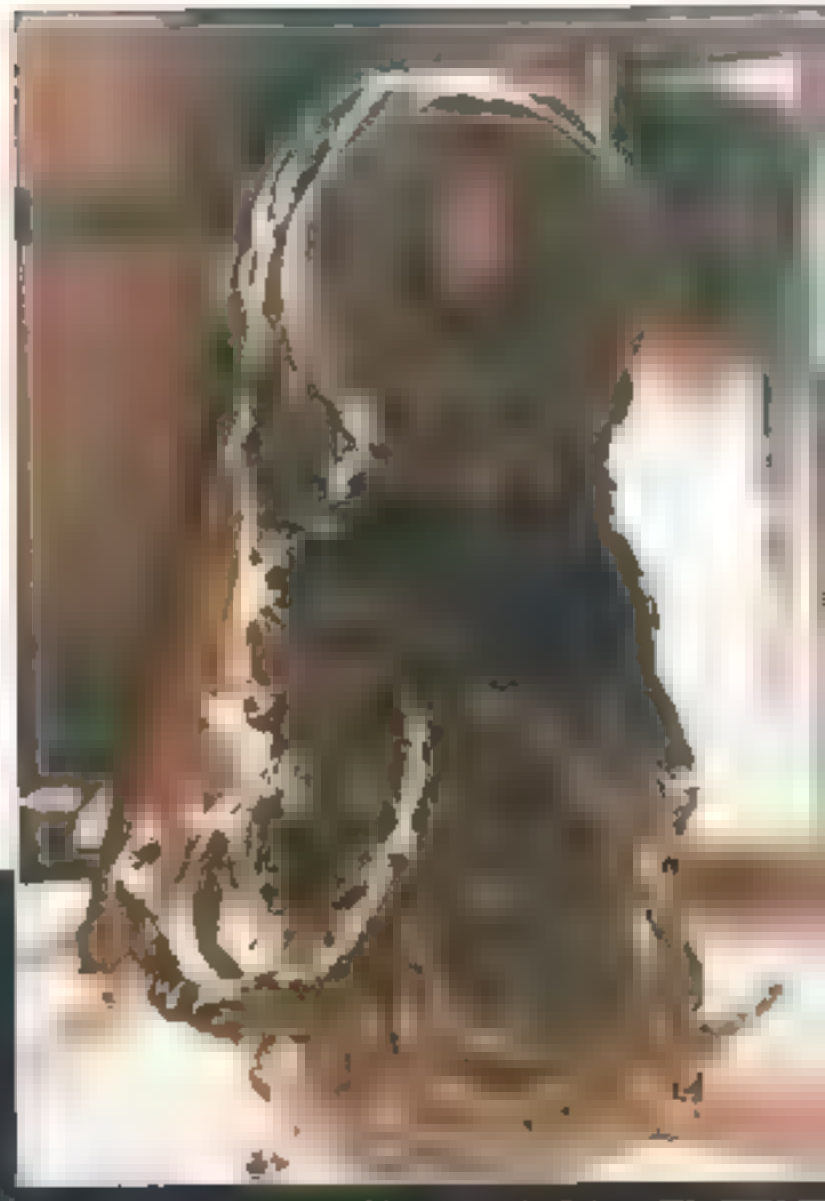
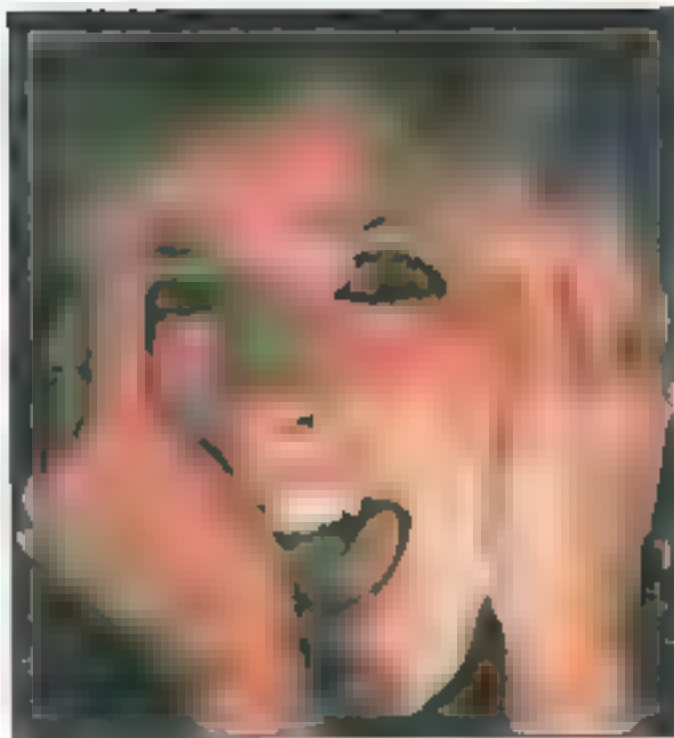
11/11/2019

The Strangeness

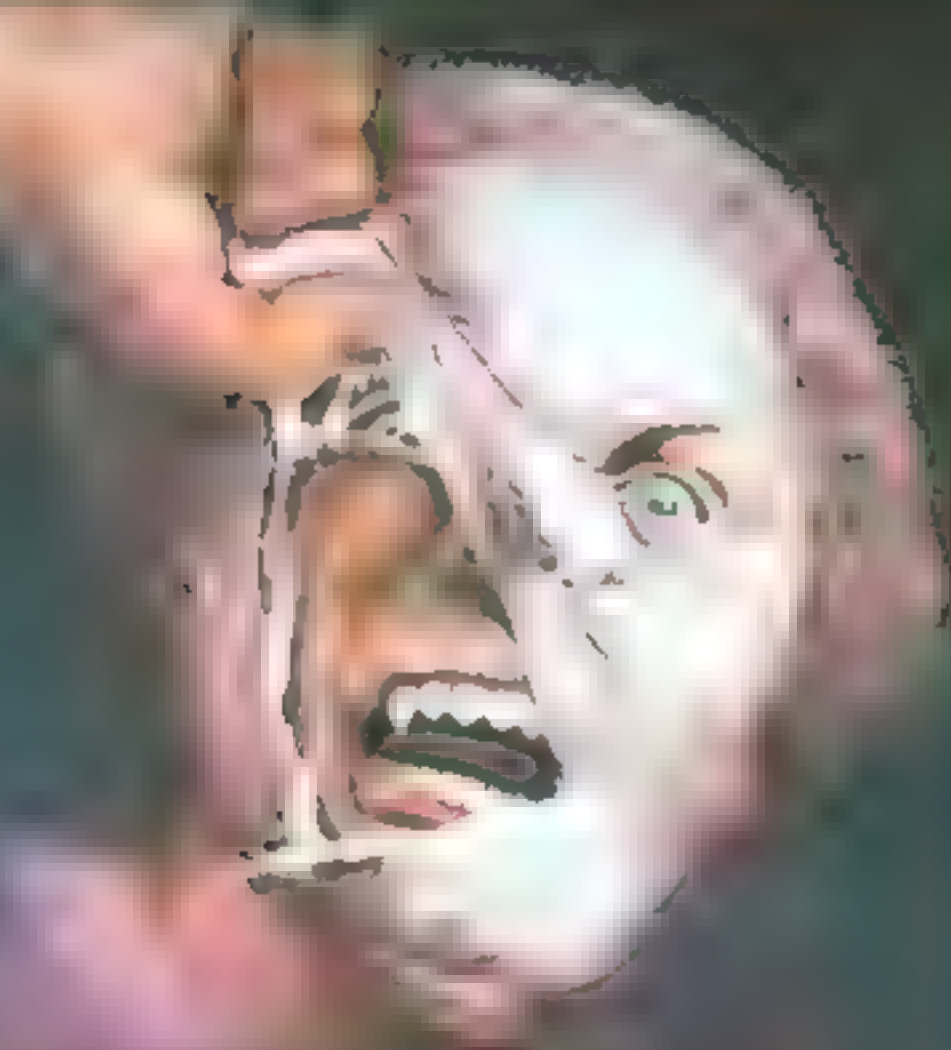
...in Britain gets
...the monster
...Huntley &
...its glory
...Huntley & Huntley
...to death

11/11/2019

...at the 1966 to
...Your Life ... depicting
...and Parker
...1966
...she is
...1966
...1982
...1972







GRAVE OF THE VAMPIRE



1. **What is the purpose of the study?**
 2. **What are the research objectives?**
 3. **What is the research design?**
 4. **What are the variables?**
 5. **What is the sample size?**
 6. **What are the data sources?**
 7. **What are the data collection methods?**
 8. **What are the data analysis methods?**
 9. **What are the results?**
 10. **What are the conclusions?**

Figure 10.10 The effect of the `align` attribute on the alignment of the text in the `caption` element.

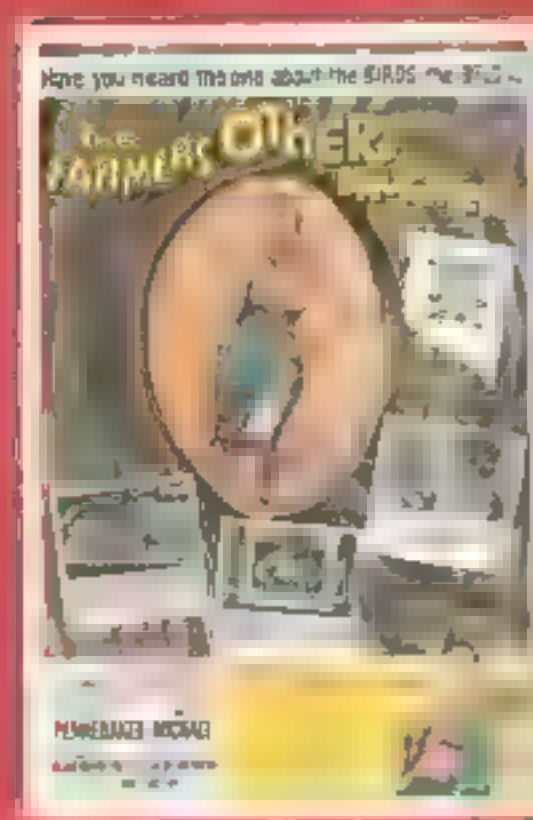
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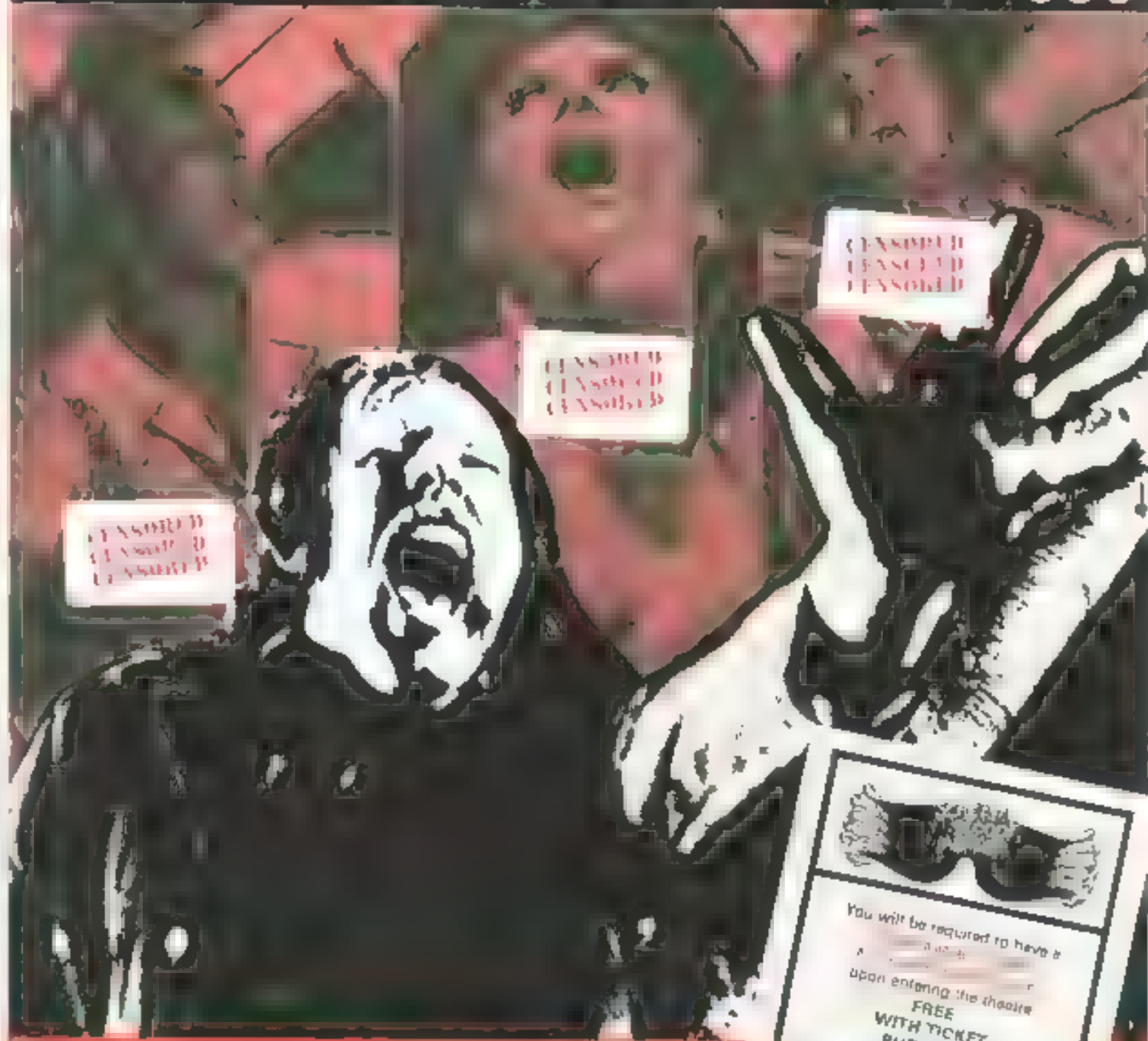
NIGHTMARE OF UNEXPECTED TERROR!




DREAM
NO EVIL



The First Motion Picture to be Called
GORE-NOGRAPHY!!!




 You will be required to have a

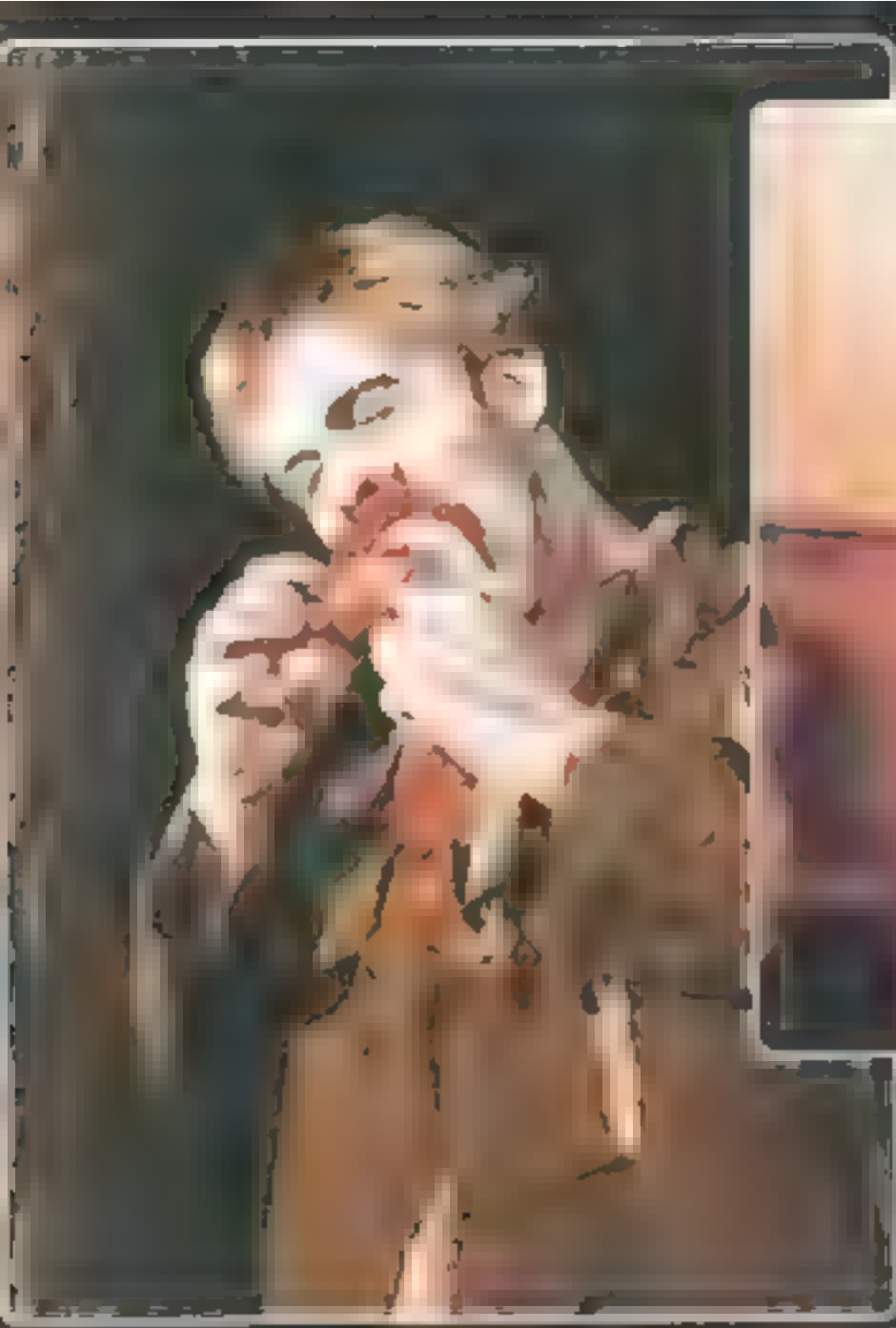
 upon entering the theatre
FREE
WITH TICKET
PURCHASE

SCREAM bloody murder

TELL IT TO THE WORLD - A MAJOR FILM BY JAMES M. HAYES - THE SILENT FILM
 BY JAMES M. HAYES - A MAJOR FILM BY JAMES M. HAYES - THE SILENT FILM

WARNING!!!
 Because of the explicit violence
 depicted in the film, theatre-goers
 must have a sound mind
 and strong stomach.

THE SILENT FILM
 BY JAMES M. HAYES



2-11-1900
3-11-1900

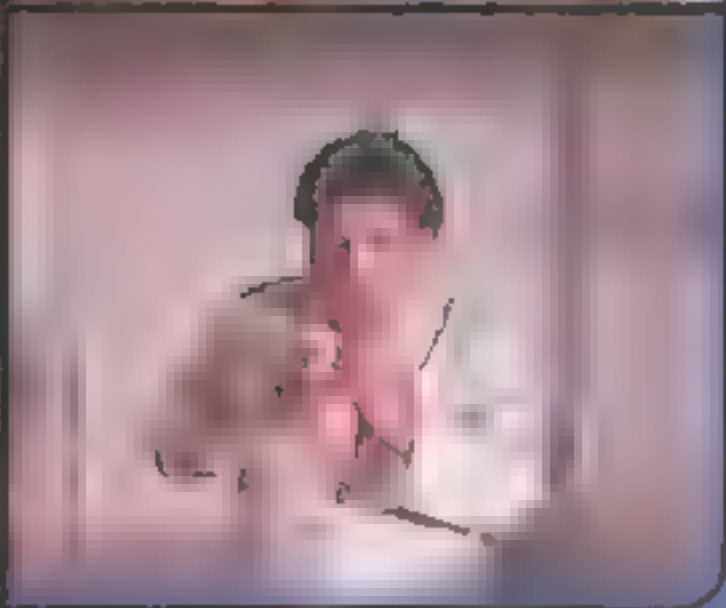
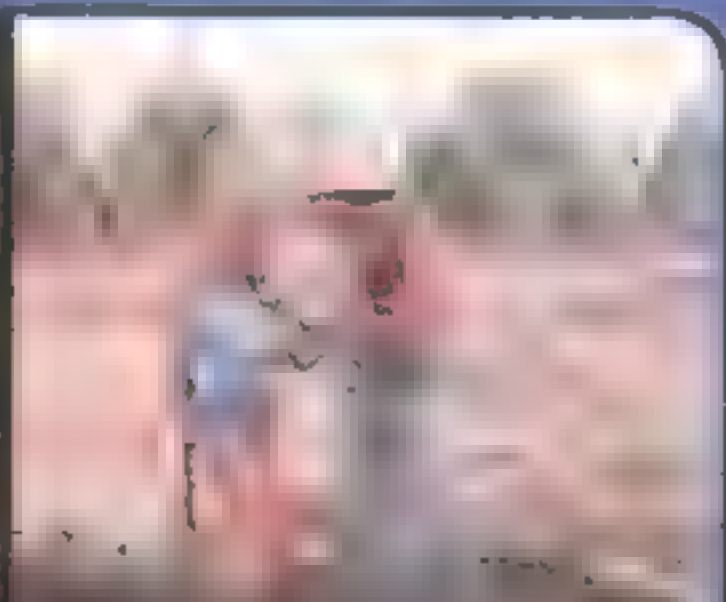
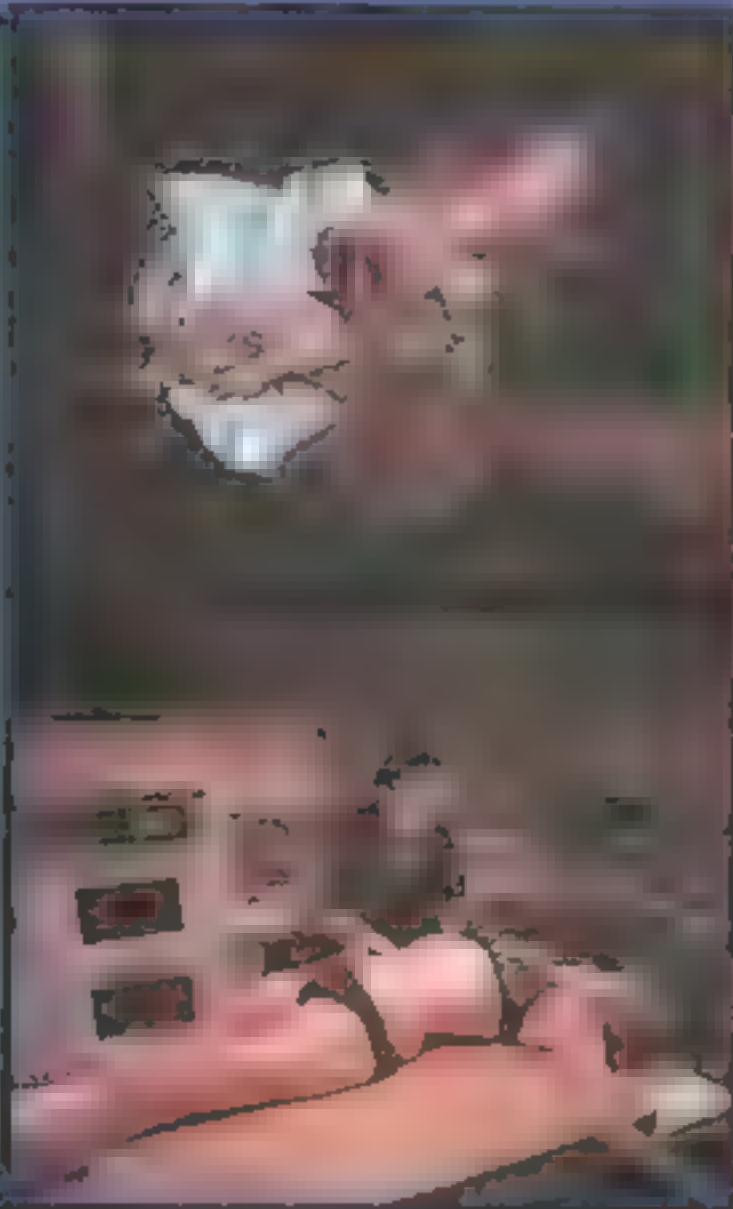


night
 4 debut **Come One**
 5, 6: on the sexploitation
 industry

far right
 1 **Hitch Hike to Hell** 1977
 2 home to brief March
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 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50
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 Microwave Massacre 1972

100some page
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 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50
 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70
 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90
 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100
 as Friday the 13th:
 The Orphan



**You have a date...
with death!**



THE ORPHAN

JULIAN WESTERGAARD ENTERPRISES and CINEMA INVESTMENTS COMPANY

in association with TRIMEDIA SOUTHWEST ASSOCIATES presents

THE ORPHAN Written and Directed by JOHN BALLARD

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
50 EAST LEXINGTON AVENUE
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017
1-800-638-3030
www.uchicago.edu

1997年10月10日 星期三

References



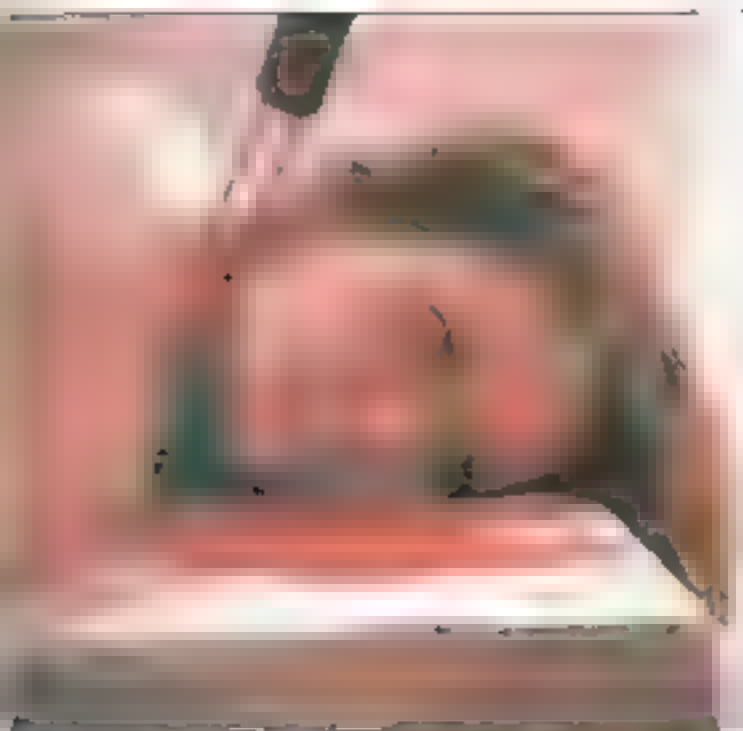
A
masterpiece
of terror and
suspense.

PREMONITION

When a woman sees a vision of her future, she must decide if she can live with the knowledge of what is to come. A masterpiece of terror and suspense.

©1995 M

THE PREMONITION



Afternoon

Monday 25 one-sheet 6 1/2 x 9 1/4

Schiller's stylistic parameters

The Premonition 1 1/2 x 9 1/4

1915, page 124

Flasher gore online is 4 1/2 x 9 1/4

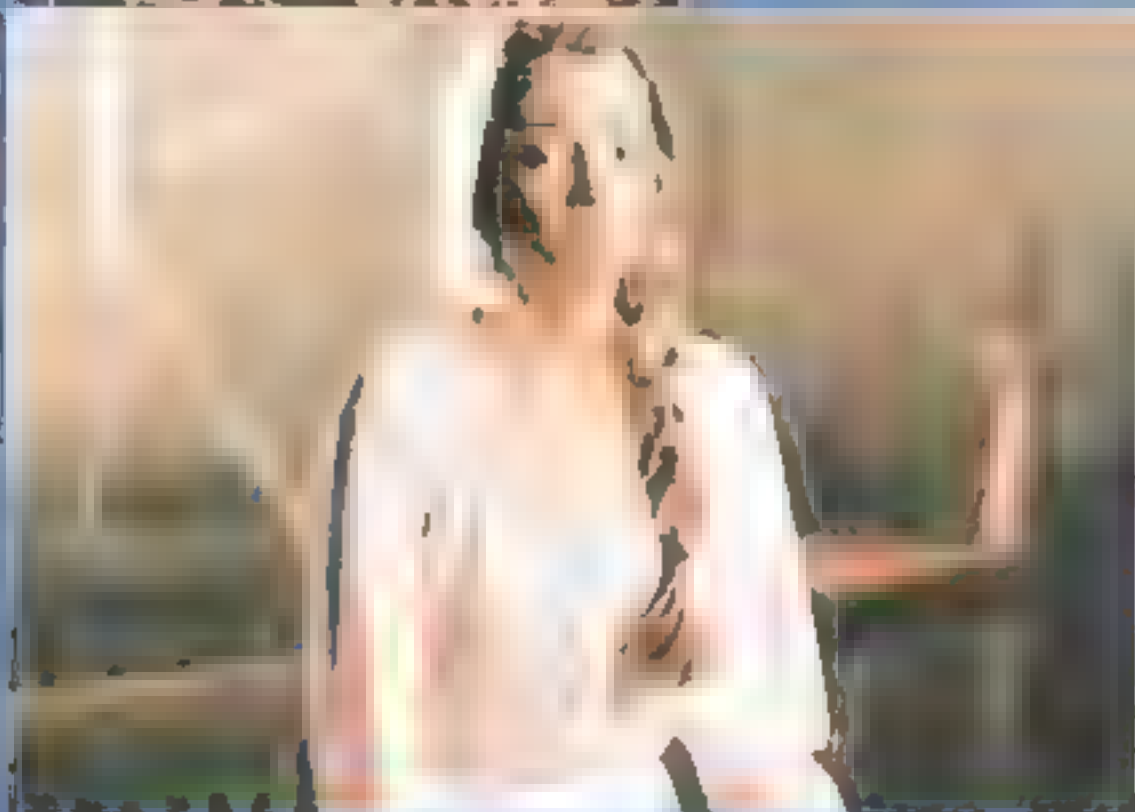
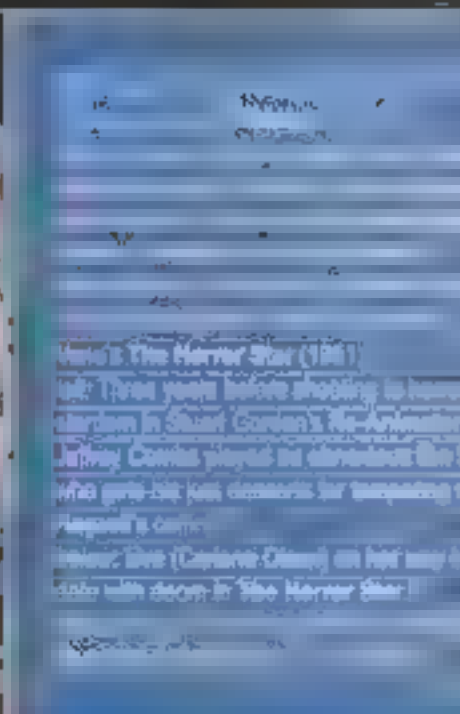
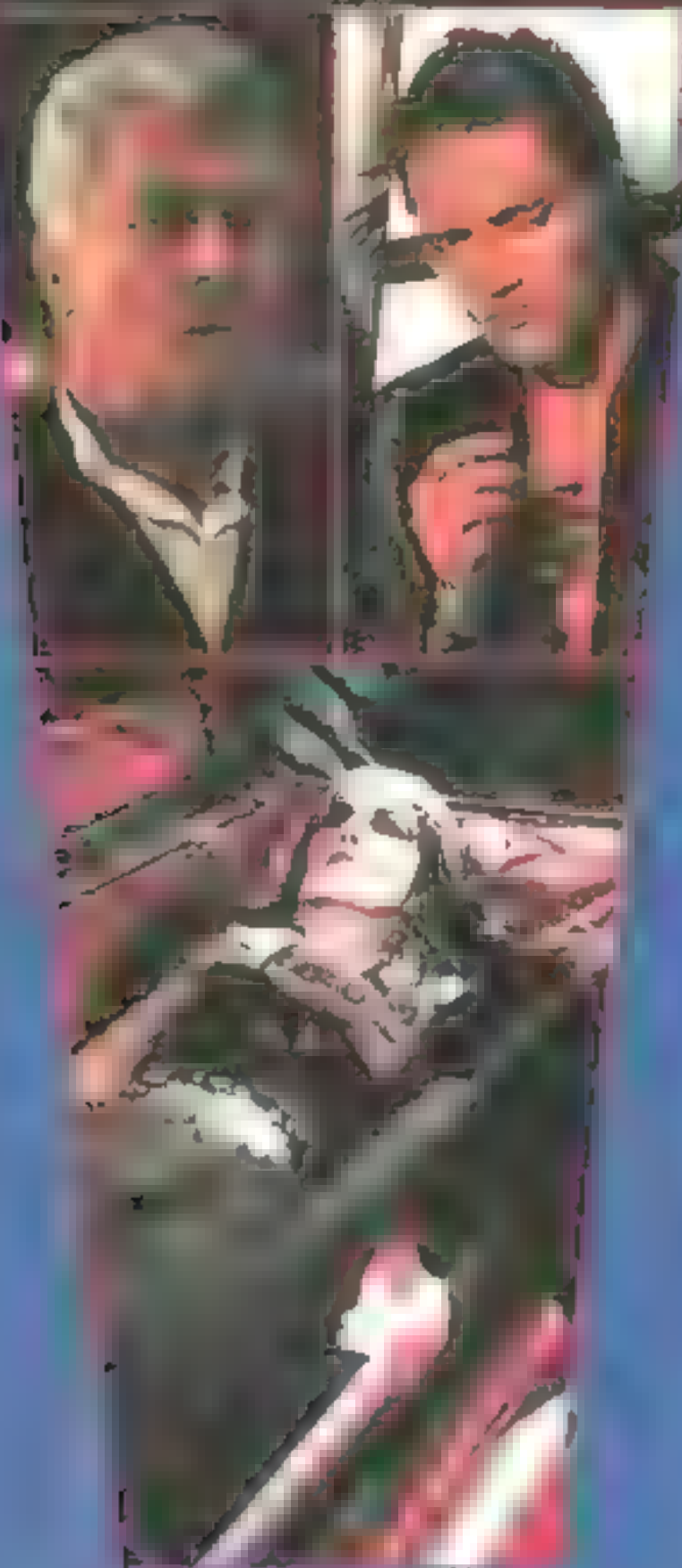
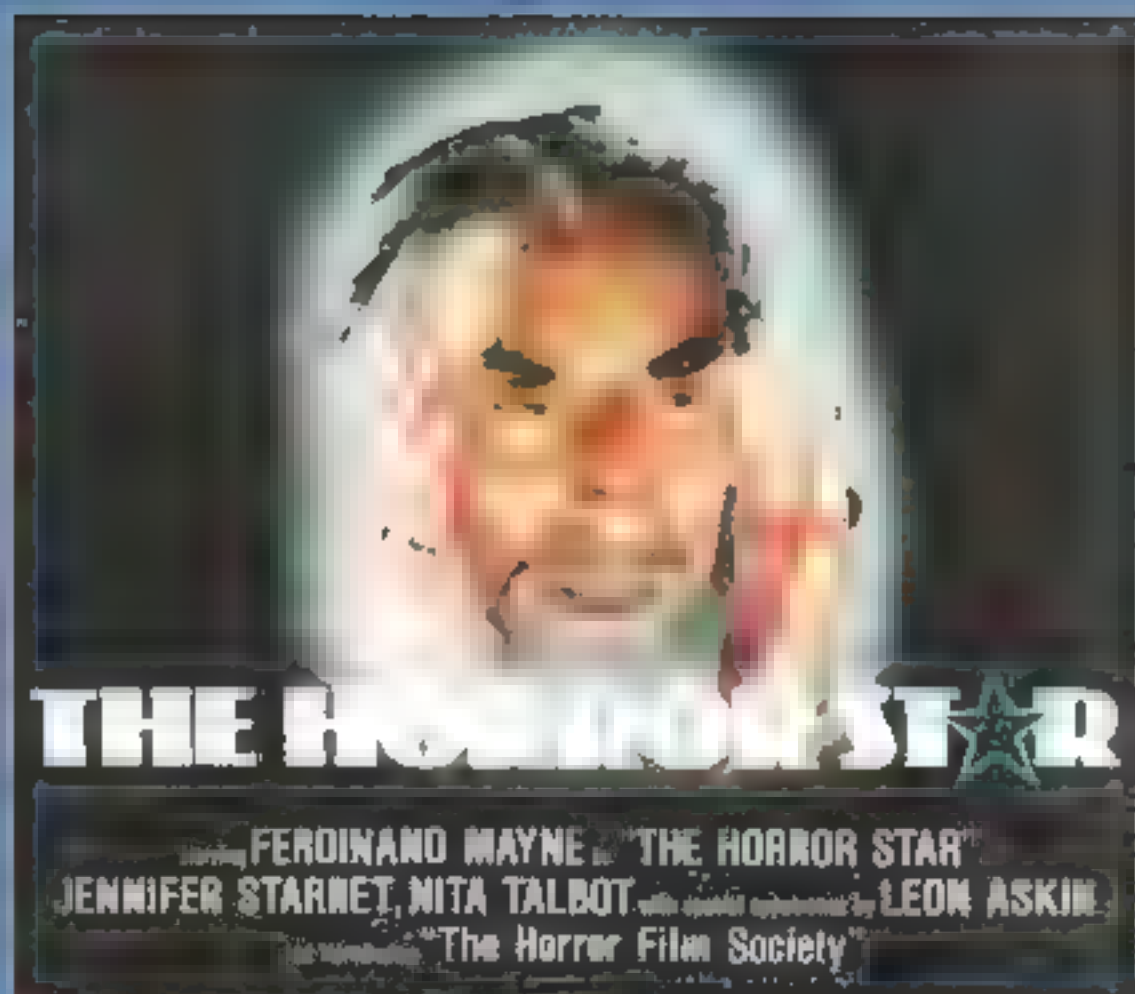
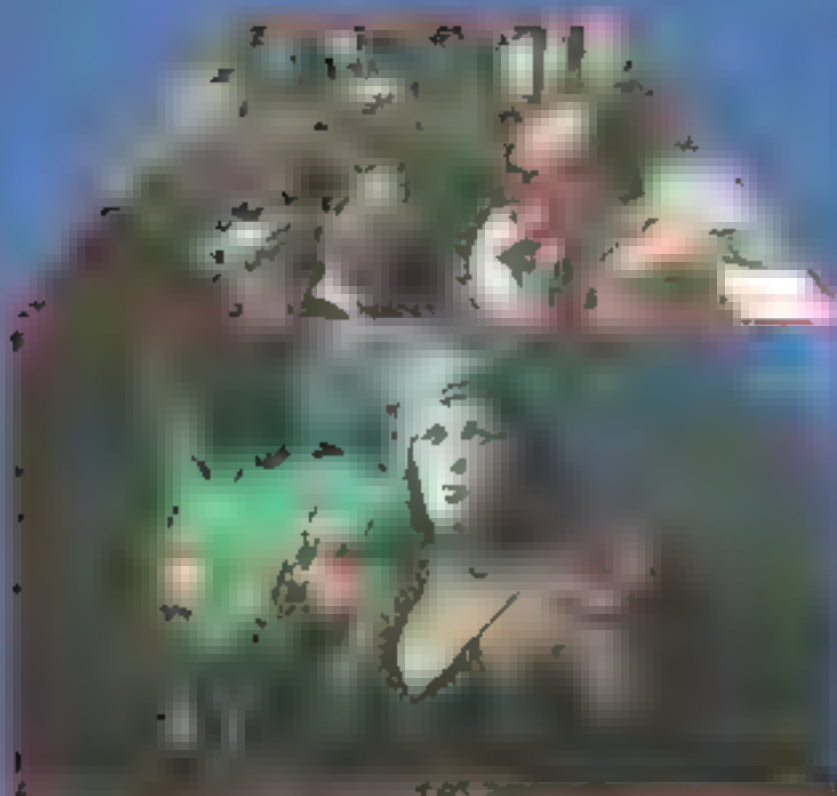
vanes The Black Room 1 1/2 x 9 1/4

1916, page 124

From The Premonition 1 1/2 x 9 1/4

Barber above in a design





There was Bela Lugosi,
Boris Karloff,
Lon Chaney,
and Conrad Nagel!

They were all stars who lived and died.
But only one returned...

THE HORROR STAR



THE DIRTIEST GAME IN THE WORLD



GRADS
CORPORATION

Dirty Games in Hollywood

The Career of James Bryan

Don't Go in the Woods (1981)

When James Bryan embarked on this low-budget horror flick, shot in a tub in the summer of 1980, he had no way of knowing that two or three years later, in Great Britain, it would become so controversial. *Don't Go in the Woods* was classified by the British Director of Public Prosecutions as a 'video nasty' – a threat to common decency, childhood innocence, family values, and the sanity of the great unwashed. First came the hostile police raids and newspaper headlines. Then, as if indignity enough had not been heaped on his modest production, came brickbats from a few genre critics, eager to justify their viewing habits to the conservative thought police. Some 'video nasties' were redeemable, even artistic. Your Honor. Others were 'just trash', not worth the effort.

I arrived late at the scene of the crime, but I soon smelled a rat. If you're asking me what's wrong with the film, well, go figure. For the record, I enjoyed the hell out of it, one of the last of the 'nasties' I saw. Nostalgia for the good old days was *not* a factor – Bryan's movie needed no musty recollections of tabloid controversy to hit all of my trash-horror buttons. Let's not mince words: it's senseless, it's gratuitously violent, it has very shaky tech credits, I forgot who was who and yet I watched it avidly from start to finish. The crude but oddly realistic violence had me hugging myself with delight, as foursquare conventions of 'proper' film-making were trampled, quite figuratively, into the mountain mud. On the day I saw it I was ill, and feeling down; by the time it was over I felt much, much better. I zsa for lin is more from my 'nasties' – a pox on those who can't share.

A film about being lost in the woods, *Don't Go in the Woods* underlines the idea by wandering from its core characters here there and everywhere, bringing the slash of the killer's blade to as many incidental victims as possible. It's that leaves the storyline incoherent, so what? Let's make that incoherence a badge of honour. It amazes me that I have to say it, but this is a *very gory film with lots of violence and murder*. Bryan is giving us precisely what we deserve and desire from a film called *Don't Go in the Woods*. Would I dare use that nomenclature? Peter

Greenaway? *Don't Go in the Woods* (and yes, the grammatically inelegant title does seem to forbid *à fresco* urination) offers all that you could reasonably expect from a low-budget horror flick about murder in the country: indeed, it goes further and tosses in psychotronic dementia and bizarre electronic music too. Anyone who ever paid a penny for this experience has only himself to blame if it fails to deliver the existential insight, metaphysical scope or action-adventure thrills they were seeking. In many ways this is the *quintessential* video nasty. Arty aberrations like Abel Ferrara's *The Driller Killer* are hardly the point; *Don't Go in the Woods* is cheap, gruesome, and yet operating on some sublime atavistic pleasure-frequency. The many savage killings are like truffles hidden in the dirt of the film's *mise-en-scène* (or maybe that's just the transfer), and they keep on coming, leaving no time for distracting subplots or time-wasting nods to the mainstream. The story has a gadfly irritability, no sooner despatching one luckless camper than moving on to the next. It's the logic of commercial horror filmmaking taken to the extreme. I just wish it had been a hit. Can you imagine Part II?

The term 'video nasty' is now an absurdity, invented by the press years ago and pounced upon by the likes of British media campaigner Mary Whitehouse (deceased); it means nothing today, when all of the films once banned are as available on eBay. I'm using it here as a historical marker, but even ignoring the glamour of illegality, I would always have felt attracted to this quasi-art-brut horror flick. It may be fetishistic (or worse still, nostalgic) to carry a torch for the nasties, but let's not forget: many of the films on the banned list were there simply because they were cheap, lacking in the niceties of studio production, and lacking moreover the industry muscle to defend themselves. That confluence of cash-based aesthetics and business manipulation lives on today. It's actually a sign of something special that this reviled little movie should have alarmed lawmakers and moralists, when some big-budget lump like *The Omen* failed to provoke a single governmental goosebump. Yet, of all cases for reappraisal, *Don't Go in the Woods* has the lowest profile. Personally, I would screen it at my own fantasy cinematheque in a second; and here's why.

What's *The Dirtiest Game in the World*? It's James Bryan's first feature film, made in 1970 – a political sex satire and a neglected low-budget gem.

Grisly mayhem as another luckless camper bites the mud, in Bryan's go-hiking-and-die classic, *Don't Go in the Woods*.



The four main characters, Peter (Jack McElfeeland), Craig (James Hayden), Joanne (Angie Brown) and Ingrid (Mary Gail Artz) bicker, pull pranks and fall out with each other in time-honoured slasher film fashion, and they are joined in this supposedly remote and unspoiled mountain region by so many other hikers that it feels like rush-hour on an ant-hill. A painter and her baby daughter, two pairs of newly-weds, a fisherman, a chick on roller-skates, an elderly couple, and even some guy in a wheelchair all seem drawn to the same patch of mountain, only to fall foul of the best psychotic mountain dweller since the cannibal family in *The Hills Have Eyes* (Tom Drury, wonderfully gross and threatening in the killer's role).

The fragmented, episodic feel is amplified by composer Kingsley Thurber and by Bryan's hectic sound editing. The score is much given to sudden spurts of electronic weirdness, brief snatches of country music and - my favourite - the maddening "steel puke" effect that Bryan explains in the following interview. As for Thurber's music cues are short, and Bryan peppers them liberally throughout. Their brevity and variability add a jagged, hiccupping madness to the movie. However, two music cues are employed frequently enough to be called themes. One is a moody synthesizer tune (not unlike the main theme from U2, Lomax's *The Boger Man*) which plays over later scenes, adding a sombre hue that sits well with the duskier locations. The other is a rhythmic piece for synthesizer, so caveman-crude it could have been played by the murderous mountain-man himself (and sounding for all the world like early DAF or Throbbing Gristle).

The music cues confuse the film's time-frame. We're used to horror films beginning with a shock-cue, and then progressing in a lighter vein, before darkening in mood as the nightmare encroaches. Bryan, however, uses comedy music over two or three scenes at the beginning of the film, then returns to it again well past the half-way stage, by which point the lead characters have suffered casualties and the aforementioned sombre cue has already begun to work its magic. This has the effect of looping the viewer's emotions, orientating it's as if we're back near the beginning of the movie, as lost in time as the characters are lost in the woods. Bryan hastens through transitions from sunlight to darkness in a way that shuffles evening



and morning, and the resulting time confusion is hated by the often shaky day-for-night scenes. Much of this is accidental, but I tend to just go with the flow, allowing the mistakes to determine my feelings, and let the more intentional elements. The rest of the film whose errors and technical failings actually help rather than impede the overall experience.

Unlike a more run-of-the-mill slasher film, there's a distinct tinge of humour to some of the action, which is not exactly sophisticated (the wheelchair-bound hiker, for example), does mean that we're a long way from boring like Edwin Brown's *The Prey* (1984) or bland efforts like Andrew Davis's *The Final Terror* (1987). The script has share of amusing lines - "you mean there are little turperverts running around out here?" asks Peter, when Craig recommends looking out for rabid animals "contrary to nature." I love the anguished cry of "I'm sorry!" from Peter when he accidentally stabs a passer-by he's mistaken for the killer and the acting of the new wed couple in the camper-van scene is so oddball you wonder if Curt 'Thundercrack' McDowell directed it.

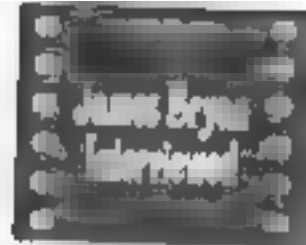
Bryan's violence, while lacking the graphic (read expensive) detail of a Tom Savini assignment, is spirited, impressive and very frequent. It's a wonder the killer gets everyone into his schedule, as he works flat out murdering an unlikely array of secondary characters and ensuring the movie never gets bogged down in unnecessary deviations from slaughter. We're treated to a limb-severing in the first five minutes, there's a wonderfully gory stabbing through a painter's canvas, and a scene where a young couple are up in their sleeping bags and then stuck with knives is as good as anything in *Friday the 13th*. The awful fate of Joanne is another gory highlight, with the editing and set design making her demise, hacked to death in a rickety caravel crisscrossed with rotting fabric, quite horribly memorable. (It reminded me of the gruesome first murder in *Theatre of Blood*, with Michael Hordern hacked to death by tramps amidst sheets of polythene). Speaking of the shock scenes, the Mountain Man's home is startlingly similar to





of Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th Part 2* which was the following year and it wouldn't be the first time the slasher franchise had borrowed ideas from less obvious films, now would it?

There are lots of details to enjoy, but it's the overall feel of the movie that works for me. There's something about the film's minimalism, its simple plotted structure, and its streamlined visual palette of the prosaic grounding in sensible filmmaking that weighs down many other slasher tales. You could call it an impressionist slasher film, with the hard-edged plot-line removed and the contents left to swirl in a defocused drift of greenery and gore. It feels like a borderless amalgam of several different slasher tales, taking the raw essence and discarding the specifics of each. The scenes where Pete is first rescued, then absconds to return to the woods and engage Joanne – probably the closest thing to a plot development in the movie – are over so quickly you could forget them. Your mind wanders, and somehow Pete somehow wins, you have a vague feeling he's been rescued, but it's not a moment to dwell on. To me, *Don't Go in the Woods* is psychedelic, not in a clichéd sense, with its ringing colours and fish-eye lenses, but in its wrenching tension between the simplest of horror tales and its red, wrenchingly off-kilter realisation. When Joanne says the acting veers from serviceable to lousy (as in a terribly dubbed campfire scene where the actors seem to be vying with each other to deliver the worst line), you get the conventional pleasure associated with B movies, but Bryan has brought something real, unsophisticated and truly idiosyncratic to the table. It's not just a case of the desire to make 'normal' movies thwarted by lack of skill. I love *Friday the 13th* and I don't want to run it down, but *Don't Go in the Woods* makes a *Friday the 13th* left out in the rain, with its smeared and its characters washed into their surroundings, and that's an entirely more exciting prospect than a corrigible aesthete like myself.



British horror fans know James Bryan as the director of the banned 'video-nasty' *Don't Go in the Woods*, a wonderful low-budget slice of rural mayhem classified as obscene in a series of British legal trials, and banned under the terms of the 1984 Video Recordings Act. The rest of Bryan's filmography has, until now, remained largely obscure, which is a shame, since his early films deserve much wider exposure. His debut, *The Dirtiest Game in the World*, offers scenes more shocking than anything in his notorious gore classic, and even today it would likely never receive an uncut release in this country. Bryan's movie career began in the late 1960s and his early work, though primitive in many respects, is influenced by the hippie era's dream of artistic subversion through sexual frankness and the confrontation of taboos.

Not all of his films repay the closest scrutiny. In the 1980s his ongoing friendship with idiosyncratic actress and producer Renee Harmon led to a couple of hastily-shot action movies lacking in focus and (not to mention money), although they still have points of interest for fans willing to put aside their many flaws. With an ethos that demanded he should keep working come what may, it's not surprising that the quality of his workmanship varies, but Bryan nevertheless exemplifies a classic American tenacity. Although his intentions were frequently thwarted or diverted, he never gave up on a project, sometimes struggling for several years to get a film onto the screen. From the shocking extremes of *The Dirtiest Game in the World* to the melancholy pessimism of *I Love You I Love You Not*, and from the makeshift action of *The Mountain Man Part II* to the hangdog capers of *Escape to Passton*, Bryan demonstrates a true passion for filmmaking. *Don't Go in the Woods* is really just the tip of the iceberg.



All images from *Don't Go in the Woods*

opposite page

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Bryan says

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James Bryan on



James Bryan with his parents circa 1943

Party Days

James Bryan was born in Houston, Texas on the 15 May, 1943 (he's the same age as fellow Texan Tobe Hooper). He grew up in East Texas where – as he explains, “the Spanish crypto-Jewish side of my family settled in 1720 and the Irish-Welsh-French Protestant side settled in 1854.” His father and mother came from sharecropper farming backgrounds. “The relatives on both sides all had that Dorothea Lange Depression look about them, refugees from a very poor rural South. I spent a lot of time at the movies – my parents, who were products of the Great Depression, were big movie fans as well.

Young James was soon drawn to an active engagement with film. “It was standard 8mm that I first encountered. I used pliers to splice the film, which crimped it, creating an odd optical effect at a cut,” he recalls. This wouldn’t be the last time that technical restrictions would leave their mark on his work. Fortunately, splicing tape was soon available. “I shot lots of 8mm, enjoyed seeing lots of films and afterwards spent hours trying to break down the way special effects were achieved. I read everything and anything available about filmmaking. Old back issues of *Life* magazine at the library and the motion picture chapter of our *Compton’s Encyclopedia* along with TV documentaries like the Wolper series.¹ After reading reviews in *Time* I would drive a hundred miles to see a new release that wouldn’t play locally for months.

For Bryan, nurturing a teenage obsession with the movies, cinema was more than just a distraction: life was film. In the days before home video, to actually own a copy of something seen on the silver screen was the stuff of dreams, and certainly itself possessed its cinematic significance. Bryan rummaged through bins behind old movie theatres, collecting discarded film rolls, trailers, and damaged offcuts from release prints. His quest was to see how the magic worked, to absorb the lessons and learn how to make it all happen. When AIP released their first low-budget drive-in movies, he was thrilled not only by the stories, but also by the accessibility suggested by their lack of polish (just as

subsequent generations would find the technical primitivism of punk rock inspiring). “I thought hey, I can do this!” he recalls. “I really enjoyed AIP films, pre-Corman, that was an awakening for me. I liked the beach party films too. I liked the Poe films later, but it was the drive-in pictures I like *The Killer Shrews* or *The Giant Claw* or that nonsense. They were liberating because there was nothing like them. It didn’t matter how bad it was, they finished the film and got it on the screen. They were so bad, they were great.

From Laboratory to Film School

In 1963 Bryan graduated from the Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, Texas, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. He worked the summer at a cancer hospital in Houston, prepping and observing doctors that were the subjects of experimental organ transplant surgery. November of ’63 saw him interviewed for a job at the Medical School at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, on the day after J.F. Kennedy was shot. Conspiracy theorists may want to add Bryan’s recollection to their data: “Our guide through P&R was a resident who was present at the J.F.K. ER scene in ’68. His TV demonstration of J.F.K.’s wound differed from his 1963 version to us Med School applicants. In this he moved his hand from the front side of the face to the rear side of the head.”

The following year, Bryan took a scholarship funded by a US Army grant for Graduate Studies at the Vanderbilt University Medical School in Nashville. There he indulged in the traditional college excesses of sex, drugs, rock n roll, and vivisection. “I fell in with the wannabe music crowd, went out a few times with the young Tammy Faye (yet to be Bakker) and spent a year removing fat pads from the gonads of euthanized lab rats,” he deadpans. By 1965, Bryan had seen enough of anatomical wards (for a while at least) and opted for a career change: he applied for a place at film school with The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), beginning his studies in September of 1965.

Bryan’s first real job in the movie industry came in ’66 as cameraman for a documentary called *Operation Bootstrap*, funded by the Rand Corporation (a non-profit organisation set up after World War Two, “To further and promote scientific, educational, and charitable purposes all for the public welfare and security of the United States America,” as their mission statement put it). The subject was a community computer-training program set up in the Watts neighbourhood of Los Angeles after the 1965 Watts riots. Bryan also worked as an usher at the Beverly Theatre in nearby Beverly Hills for a short time and followed that with a stint as a UCLA film class projectionist. Around this time, he decided to move from his campus residence at Westwood, instead heading for Venice Beach, drawn there by what he saw as its “enticing New Bohemian reputation.”

In 1967, after a job as gaffer-cum-grip on a documentary about the death penalty called *Religion in Jail* made by Michael Parks for The American Civil Liberties Union, Bryan directed his first film, an animated short called *Inner Limits*. Bryan describes it as a sci-fi concept “in the *Outer Limits* vein, a visual pun on the unified field theory using a series of dissolves and pull-backs starting from a close-up on one of many busy pens making notes in a lecture hall and quickly moving back to global, planetary, galactic and ultimately universal views. The universe is revealed to be a small glowing mass in a particle generator and the voice-over physics lecture is cut short when the

glowing mass universe is bombarded with accelerated particles by a pair of ambitious researchers in search of new grant funding." With gratifying speed, *Inner Limits* received immediate television exposure as part of a CBS Special called *The New Communicators*, overseen by Lee Mendelson, the producer of the *Charlie Brown* cartoons. With this cosmic comedy under his belt, Bryan took an interest in darker ideas; they were to cause him serious psychological complications.

California in the late 1960s was a socio-cultural hotspot, a lodestone of 20th Century Western culture. Bryan was embroiled in the fantasies and dreams of the day, and UCLA was an electric environment. If you were so attuned studying there, says Bryan, "was empowering in a social sense. Given the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius and the experimenting with drugs and sex, any level of film production was a chance to create a Happening-like state. We all wacked the wack and talked the talk and wore the Hippie uniform and had the long hair and practiced creative nonconformity and believed our joy would go on forever. Civil disobedience and police riots put a different spin on it. So while we all giggled finding Francis Ford Coppola's 'Nude' outtakes in the editing room and gossiped about the last year's film students who centred their rock band around an electric organ and opened at the Whisky-a-Go-Go and became The Doors, another of our merry pals indulged inclinations toward sexual mutilation and murder while partaking of LSD. A couple more exercised their rights to perform as police agents at local and federal levels, compiling personal data and attempting to encourage illegal political gestures as a means of protecting the greater good."

Aware of the huge cultural changes going on around him, Bryan sought to develop his aesthetic awareness, as was not satisfied with a merely passive relationship to Art. In particular, he felt drawn to the category of aesthetics termed as 'the Grotesque': "It was during this period that I stumbled onto the primitive power of 'the aversion effect,'" he recalls. "When purposely embracing those things which seem horrifying or repulsive, my aversion-response mechanism shifted, refocusing onto new associations: my case, natural textures. I spent a terrifying few months rated, even psychotic, reactions to usually pleasant textures like the texture of bark on trees. After a gradual and fitful recovery, I treated aversion with a great respect. I believe my texture-directed aversion was the result of trying to embrace the common things of my aversion by a deliberate force of will. It seemed to me that there was a primal reflex, a raw non-rational mechanism, that its gross negative reaction, creates an opposite effect which we see rationally as attractive, desirable beauty."

The displaced aversion that Bryan refers to has similarities to the synaesthetic experience accessible through LSD. I asked Bryan if he thinks the drug could have played a part in his alarming reaction. "The LSD experience was in the air at that time," he admits, "and was a huge influence on me and all my fellow students who lasted after the artistic phase of an altered consciousness. R.D. Laing had just published ideas on mental problems as positive creative reactions to influences, so it seemed the drugs your brain made out as good as the drugs recommended by radical Harvard professors.⁴ My aversion interest was part of my peculiar personal psychology. My interests moved me to attempt to formalize in some small way an aesthetic for the grotesque, at least in terms of images. I was leaning toward fears of deformity as biological violence. Images of rot and

decay fascinated me, but I was too socially well-behaved to go so directly to the boundaries of accepted or conditioned taste. I was excited by the notion of causing my audience discomfort on an artistic level but not to the degree or damage of a psychic sort. Not 'fall on' torture, maybe only a tease at torture. And yes, it was all humorous to me' - up until the aversion demon turned on me."

Bryan would eventually incorporate his love of decay imagery in *Don't Go in the Woods*, with its filthy mountain cabin in a rotten, tumbledown shack, but before that he attempted to explore his fascination with biological violence in his second film: "I did a student project involving a female character who was an amputee, and approached a coed who had lost a leg as the result of an out-of-control Frat Party colliding with an out-of-control police officer, who fired into the crowd. She explained to me that her friends thought it a great idea but her parents worried that I was disturbed and might be planning a nude scene for sick reasons of my own. We talked about it for a while and agreed it was not a situation that could please everyone, so I went to the blonde actress who sings with Mike Hall in *Escape to Positano*, and she wore a special device that worked just fine from one angle."

Bryan was essentially looking for ways to represent a dissident attitude, and playing with ideas in a sufficiently intense way to cause himself some psychological problems (the sort which, when added to vast amounts of LSD, would result in a significant number of so-called acid-casualties lost in their own private hells in the fallout of the hippie era). Although Bryan's use of LSD was not quite so extreme, he didn't emerge entirely unscathed from this period of his life.

My pseudo-deformity ultimately was made manifest when a life time of trauma-induced selective blackouts finally erased enough brain cells to leave a big empty space at the centre of my brain. The doctors who gave me the MRI results asked

"had been a prisoner of war or suffered some extreme chemical exposure. A certain kind of anxiety would cause people, events or situations to disappear. At one point I began to be aware of them as they happened, people as black outlines that I didn't recognize and objects that I couldn't see or find until after the anxiety was no longer attached to the object. At odd times the erased situations reappear as half-

al recollections, like scenes from a script I might have written; I'm never sure if they are real. These things are relatively mundane and don't seem to be unusual or horrifying. The effects are just a little disturbing, in that recall is a bitch. I remember a name I should know, or the spelling of a word, or even a specific word sometimes hours after I reached for it. Word recognition is sometimes interrupted in the midst of conversation. I do find this situation humorous and have worked out a few ways to kick-start my brain when it stalls. It seems the brain keeps duplicate files in odd places and most cells are interchangeable, so that any synapse will keep the wheels

going over as impulses search for alternative connections until a circuit is complete. I just have to keep a steady supply of stimulations coming and the matter snaps into place."

While these experiences relate mainly to Bryan's personal life, he did follow through when it came to pushing the boundaries of what could be shown onscreen. The violent imagery of his first feature film is more sexual than textual, but it nonetheless acts as a gross confrontation with taboo, and must have created its own aversion responses in unsuspecting audiences who wandered in to early screenings of *The Dirtiest Game in the World*.

she was working in a bar where they were supposed to have nude dancers but she would get nude and then give health lectures, sexual health lectures, to the guys! So it was different. Somebody said "You should get her." There was a political theme to the picture, and because the film was weird and strange and the whole approach was different. I said okay."

Stone makes her entrance doing an energetic reveal-a-striptease in her sunny apartment (actually James Bryan's Venice Beach house at the time – it later featured in Vernon Zimmerman's *Fade to Black*), starting off nude and then getting dressed while dancing to one of the rollicking Country Al Russ songs dotted throughout the film. The next time we see her she's turning Titus on to grass, before engaging him in a polymorphous sexual tryst that must have had a few unsuspecting punters spluttering into their raincoats (if you get my drift). The strap-on scene is a real brown-eye-opener, but it's played as part of a montage including shots where Titus fucks Jean too: in effect, Bryan declines to exploit the shock value of male penetration and substitutes a playfulness and sense of erotic exploration. Stone, who resembles a young Patty D'Arbanville, also shines during dialogue scenes, coming across as a natural screen performer whose casual line readings are all the more impressive next to the painfully awkward Moody.

The Dirtiest Game in the World is a compelling debut that holds your attention throughout its (admittedly brief) running time – at just over an hour it seems the ideal length for a sex drama of this kind. But it's a cold film and not for everyone, filled as it is with mean, loveless, cynical and unsympathetic characters. Titus is needlessly cruel and callous to his wife ("*The only reason I'm here is that a senator needs a wife to get votes. After the election we're through.*"), the initially likeable Jean turns nasty after seducing Felicia ("*Ho! Are you kidding? You didn't think that was for real, did you?*"), while minor character Frank, although honestly devoted to Felicia, is two-faced with Titus – willing to screw his buddy's wife behind his back while trying to stoke up trouble with R.J. "No-one can be trusted" seems to be the (rather paranoid) theme.

As for poor Felicia. She's an alcoholic, she can't arouse her husband, her lesbian lover dumps her after one munch, and her desperate attempt to "swing" her way back into hubby's heart leads to rape and humiliation. She's doomed because she can't let go of her bourgeois values: instead she's consumed by fantasies of vengeance against the woman who's "stolen" her husband. Her attempt to take control as an S&M Goddess ("*Tonight what I say is law. Understand?*") ends in mockery and degradation as she gets raped by her love-rival ("*Right, this is it you neurotic cunt.*"). Sherri Powell's sexually frustrated Felicia would have fitted neatly into John Waters's *Desperate Living*, thanks to a performance that is at times melodramatic to the point of camp. She's always impressive though, and makes a credible tormented focus of attention as the film gathers pace for its gruesome, upsetting *pièce de résistance*. Her descent into madness may be a little overdone, but by the time we see her gouging a razorblade into her pussy – ps only a few diehards will be laughing.

Certainly, the film was a shock to the system for those who saw it first, as Bryan recalls: "I showed the film to a lot of people, it was a few months ahead of its time and no-one knew what to do with it. They felt it was way over the top. Some distributors got really upset as to why I would make such a film. I was mixing sex, an exploration



element, with comedy and with politics and with violence. And you didn't do that. David Friedman was one of the first people I brought it to, and he said, 'We'll make you this deal' – but I didn't just buy. He owns cars and I'm gonna trust him? I don't know, maybe I should have! So I said, 'I'm sorry.' Everybody was in one big compound on Cordova Street. Seymour Borde, who distributed *Don't Go in the Woods* a few years later, rented a space from Friedman – I showed it to Seymour. 1970, right after him. I'm sure Friedman said go next door and show it to Seymour. But it was too much for him. Seymour wasn't the one who had the strongest reaction though, that was Hal Herzog – he was very upset. 'How could you do this? What do you think you're trying to do?' I was pushing too many buttons with that movie. I'd thought, 'they're coming to see a sex film, they're open for anything!'

The Dirtiest Game in the World hasn't received much attention recently from fans of 'X' entertainment, although it has an edge that prefigures the porno films of Walter Davis, Zebedy Colt and Jess Franco. Shot in March of 1970, its theatrical release was delayed until 1972 when *Deep Throat* cleared the way for further extremes. It crossed the boat on video too: by the time it emerged as one of Titus Moody's Cult Classics in the early 1990s, the mould had been set and Bryan's contribution to sadomasochism by and large excluded from the history books. It is always going to be best-known for his enjoyable sasher romp *Don't Go in the Woods*, but recommend you seek out *Dirtiest Game*: you can bet that it too would have fallen foul of the Video Recordings Act if anyone had dared to release it in the UK.

Dirtiest Game's star Titus Moody, best known to trash-movie fans as 'Boo Boo' from Ray Dennis Steckler's immortal upwatchable *Rat Fink and Boo Boo* (1966) was one of Bryan's closest friends in the industry. "The only character I remember fondly from that period – what a



On what happens at a Cirsco
Escape to Passion shows it all in
a film.



in and 40 Lyons

an Escape to

255 27 not necessarily readings

one + Danger Diabolik

as a distracted from his

gatecrash the scene after their bungled bank
hide out from the police. The party atmosphere
like a shabby *dolce vita* for the gutterporn under-
world, the police add blood and bullets to the
Escape to Passion lacks the gritty intensity of *Dirty
Game* but it's still worth seeking out. With its shad-
gangsterism and weird sex, it's like a soft-porn variant
on early Woody Allen f.m. with the element of
parody lending a sardonic edge to the clichés.

During post-production on *The Dirtiest Game in
World* and *Escape to Passion*, Bryan occupied an edit-
ing room on Market Street near Venice Beach
shared with Chris Manger, his cameraman and assoc-
producer on *Escape to Passion* (Manger would go on
to direct the enjoyably hokey *Kiss of the Tarantula* in 1974).
It was a prime location with h-p credentials: local
legend held that Jim Morrison had stayed at the address early in
his career, and Orson Welles had used Market Street
locations for his masterly *Touch of Evil*. In early 1971, with
Escape to Passion completed, Bryan moved downstairs in
the same building, adapted an unused studio space
belonging to L.A. sculptor Larry Bell, and set up the
Market Street Studio, shared communally with
local artists and filmmakers.

It was here that he began work on a satire of the sex
industry called *The Young Moviemakers* (aka *Gilda*), which
eventually emerged, six years later, as *Boogie Vision*.
Bryan pulled the cast together at Market Street
improvise scenes, which he then wrote up into script form.
Meanwhile a sound stage was created, and sets built. *The
Young Moviemakers* was shot during 1971 and post-
production began in '72, however, the project fizzled and
stalled several times due to lack of money and energy.

In the meantime, Bryan worked as sound effects edi-
tor on Larry G. Brown's incredible horror opus *An Eye for
an Eye*, better known on video as *Psychopath: "Psycho"*.
"It was basically a soundstage picture," he says, "it was a
drama, an actor's piece. It was okay but very strange. I
wasn't a 'Mr. Rabbit' guy, Tom Hasham, was a very strange
character. When I first saw Pee-wee Herman I wondered if
it was him or an interpretation of him. I was involved with
the music with Al Ross. I remember those sessions well.
Al Ross was a devotee of alcohol. The path of least
resistance for me was editing, because like with Larry's
film, he just needed someone to get it done, he didn't see
so much in post-production, that was beyond his
involvement in a way. And so I felt I should get it done as
cheaply as possible and just cover the bases.

With *The Young Moviemakers* dragging on, Bryan put
it aside to direct another three adult-themed movies. The
first of these, *I Love You I Love You Not* (the onscreen I
omits punctuation), was written and directed in 1973, and
released in 1974. The impetus came from a job that he
snagged as cameraman on an educational short
Introduction to Numbers, for Encyclopaedia Britannica
Films. Bryan used the camera he was issued with to shoot
his own movie. *I Love You I Love You Not*, "a more
realistic psychological portrait, one woman's life in sex."
Bryan puts it, gathers towards another impressively
downbeat finale, but there are signs this time of directorial
fatigue. The sex scenes, though still not hardcore, are
longer and more numerous, and they sometimes lack the
plotting dynamics that gave them purpose in *Dirtiest
Game*. The sound edit gives the impression of being
completed in a hurry, with occasional blank patches lacking



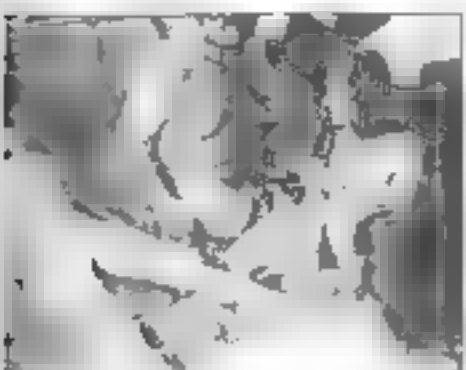
Frank Allen and Katherine
during the chaotic shoot-out.
Escape to Passion

The trio of would-be
kills are the ...

sic and dialogue (a problem that would recur in
Part II, another rush-job). That said, the
slow burner that transcends its limitations: despite
its flaws it stuck in my mind for days

Follows the fortunes of Lynn. Lynn Harris,
though she's married to Vietnam veteran Frank
Michael, here billed as Frank Michaels, takes to
bed with other men. Her friend Frances (Frances
says that she's losing control of her life, but
Lynn and batters onto married man Leo (Leo
is Leonard Shoemaker), who ...
Lynn tolerates Lynn's infidelity, but leaves in
when Frances reveals that Lynn has told her of his
"comings". With Frank out of the way
attempts a lesbian seduction. Lynn rejects it
against her - and jumps into bed with Frank
rejects Lynn, when she commits the cardinal
of telephoning his family home. Gradually
closest to Lynn peel away, leaving her to sink
in loneliness and depression. Walking home
helpless and desperate, she is raped by a gang of
who abandon her in the midst of a muddy and
human development. Life seems to have reached
Is there time to turn things around, or is
it too late?

This is a film probably best approached only after you
adjust to the rites and rhythms of seventies porn
pathetic viewer, looking at it cold, would likely
last twenty minutes, associating the frequent sex
with a lack of artistic imagination. And fair enough
if that's all there is to the sex, so if there's a
story, identity to be found. Besides all the screwing,
give serious, understated performances; and
a perspective emerges on sexual alienation and the
deferring emotional commitment. The opening



Directed and Produced
by JAMES BRYAN

ESCAPE TO PASSION

STARRING
Leonard Schumaker
Kathie Hilton
Barbara Carr
Sebastian Fitz
Marion Vandervorst
Frank Mirlen

scene, where Lynn cavorts with a casual partner who keeps up a stream of jokes and quips, gets the sex off to an amusing start, but the man, though clever and funny, is rarely using wit and intellect to keep emotions at bay. This is not a distinction you would expect from a randy sex fuckfest, nor is it arty pretension. It's a classic case of a director exploring psychological reality within the flawed framework of exploitation.

If there's a drawback to this movie, it's more structural than sexual: the story of Lynn, her failed ambitions and her indecision regarding the men in her life, lacks focus and meanders. You could argue that the film and the leading lady suffer the same malaise. While some of this may well have been deliberate, it's always going to be a challenge to reflect a character like Lynn without weakening your narrative, and Bryan slips into disarray here and there. He's not exactly alone in this: he initially withholds information about the characters, leaving us to piece together not only the status of the men with whom Lynn shares her bed but the chronology of their relations too. This is a classic '70s maverick strategy, redolent of such obliquely 'difficult' directors as Henry Jaglom and Robert Altmann. I wouldn't stress the similarities too much but there's no doubt in my mind that there was 'something in the air' at the time; the film's looseness is partially a function of the seventies maverick sensibility and not merely laziness.

If you think this all sounds too bleak and serious, there's always Bryan regular Frank Miller, who brings his comedic skills to a scene where he nifts Scorsese-style on the revelation that love-rival Leo has only one testicle; and he later shines during a scene in which Lynn's bouzy mother seduces him (it's a classic of drunken embarrassment: he tells her he has a small dick, she pipes up with a rendition of 'I'm a Little Teppal').

I Love You I Love You Not is a curio, a post-hippie comedown caught on film. 'Free love' has become more of an unsatisfactory habit for Lynn than a source of lusty joy or liberation. While the sex is at first presented as pleasurable, there's a gradually more enervated vibe to the story that makes Lynn's vacillating emotional life the real focus of concern. Nice guy Leo seems to want nothing more than a bit on the side, but when Lynn starts to cling, threatening his marriage, Mr. Nice Guy turns into a hot-tempered loudmouth. Girlfriend Frances tries to talk Lynn out of sleeping around, but her motivation proves to be selfish: her objection to Lynn's promiscuity is merely a prelude to a lesbian advance. When this fails she selfishly spoils an attempted truce between Lynn and Frank by betraying a confidence about Frank's small penis. Humiliated, Frank leaves his wife for good. Even Lynn's selfish mother turns her back. To cap it all, once Lynn has retreated into depression, Frances and Frank get it together, refusing to answer the phone when Lynn calls for help.

All of this makes for a rather downbeat view of the free-love ideal. As often in seventies porno, the spectacle of orgies and multiple couplings is served up to audiences who are then told how ruinous these things are in real life. It's a combination of prudence and moralising that permeates many an American sex film of the era. While I would applaud the film for its commitment to slowly draining the life from its narrative, it's a pity that Bryan offers no alternative, positive spin on sexual hedonism. It seems the choice is between unhappy, unsatisfying marriage or aimlessness and exploitation in a string of hollow sexual encounters. Like Felicia in *The Dirtiest Game in the World*,

Lynn tries to achieve happiness through sex but ends up finding only bitterness and misery. In *Dirtiest Game* Felicia's problems are caused by her inability to see beyond bourgeois notions of fidelity. *I Love You I Love You Not* seems to explore the reverse angle - what happens in open relationships? - only to conclude that they lead to the same depression, alcoholism and tragedy as before. Perhaps the sex film industry is inclined to spread this message because it leaves only porno itself as an option - virtual infidelity without the dangers of sexual freedom or the stifling dictates of monogamy. I wouldn't make so cynical a case here - if James Bryan wants to tell sad tales of unhappy souls failing to find solace in sex, I can dig that. I just feel that this film would have been enriched by a parallel story exploring a less catastrophic interpretation of sexual freedom. Perhaps the overall bleakness of the movie inspired what followed, as Bryan turned to greater explicitness within a more light-hearted context.

Enter Morris Deal

In 1974, having paused at the brink of hardcore with *I Love You I Love You Not*, Bryan decided to follow the example of others in the field, and make true hardcore films under a pseudonym, thus leaving his real name free of potentially damaging associations, and so Morris Deal was born. The first film to appear from this alter ego was *High School Fantasies*, which Bryan wrote and directed in February 1974 for producer Dick Aldrich (aka Damon Christian). It starred Larry Barnhouse, alongside adult-movie regulars Rene Bond and her husband/frequent co-star Ric Laize, Nicole Riddell (who appeared in *It's a Sin*, *She Wolf of the SS* the following year), and Leo Lyons (aka Leonard Shoemaker) from *Escape to Passion* and *I Love You I Love You Not*.

Freddy (Larry Barnhouse) is a teenage nerd suffering the time-honoured difficulty of bedding girls, in particular his dream-date Mury (Rene Bond). His friends, Buddy (Ric Laize) and Moose (Tony Mazzotti), have no such problems and try all sorts of ideas to help him, but all they seem to do is cost Freddy a lot of dough. One day they convince him to try a dose of Spanish Fly (which in truth they have made up themselves in their basement). Somehow, their homemade brew actually works - when girls taste a soda spiked with the concoction they go crazy with lust. But the proud inventors discover they are unable to repeat their recipe.

Amazingly for a porno film, an original soundtrack album was released⁸ the film's rock'n roll revival score, according to those who've seen the film, is one of its most persuasive features. Gene Sarmun, an artist-scripior Bryan met whilst working as production assistant on Terry Sanders's Academy Award-nominated documentary *Four Stones for Kamenutzu*, did the music along with his buddy Bob Spater. "Gene Sarmun had a band back in New York in the late fifties, early sixties," Bryan remembers. "He cut a single and was picked up by Paul Revere and the Raiders for an East Coast tour. He really enjoyed doing the *High School Fantasies* music." Sarmun and his wife Jacqueline Camhas first met Bryan when they moved to a rented studio in Venice where Bryan was shooting the climactic orgy shoot-out from *Escape to Passion*⁹. Sarmun appeared as a motorcyclist who's shot down in that film, and played one of the rapists in *I Love You I Love You Not*. Jacqueline Camhas worked for a while on the stop-start project *The Young Movie-makers* (an ex-UCLA student she



10
 100 ft
 100 ft
 Farlan-11

100 ft
 100 ft
 More caving and confusion in
 Escape to Passion



began as editor for Tom Laughlin, and moved on to a successful editing career working on Paul Schrader's *Hardcore* and *Car People* and mainstream fare like the Al Pacino vehicle *Frankie and Johnny*.

Morris Deal followed *High School Fantasies* with the appealingly titled *Beach Blanket Bingo*, shot in September 1974. It again starred horny couple Renee Bond and Ric Lutze, as well as several other cast members from *High School Fantasies*, joined this time by Bryan's buddies Frank Millen (as Frank Michaels) and Titus Moody. A spoof on the sixties A.P. beach movies, it works on references to LSD, a haunted house piss-take, and the obligatory surfing footage. Perhaps still carrying a torch for the provocations of his first movie, in the midst of this frivolity Bryan has some of the characters sent to Vietnam, cutting through the

good-time ambience with actual war footage. For the period soundtrack, Dick Aldrich clinched a deal with a Hollywood music entrepreneur who owned a huge library of old demos by "howl-at-ake" bands of the sixties.

Given that the sex industry was plunging dark waters at the time, with the grimy violence of *Zeddy* (olt Alex De Renzy, Shaun Costello and Armond Weston going further than even *The Dirtiest Game in the World* had dared), it's interesting that Bryan's first two hardcore films are such frothy, light-hearted confections, based around nostalgia and pastiche. Having directed the downbeat pessimistic *I Love You I Love You Not*, one could hardly call Bryan a brazen hedonist, and *Dirtiest Game*'s denouement is still shocking today, but in both cases the acts onscreen were simulated. When it came to making fuck films with no-one faking it, Bryan essentially had no thirst to explore the more violent possibilities. His view of the industry was coloured by wariness about the psychological fallout, as he explains: "The sex film biz is a universe of its own, bizarre and dark, hidden from the light, growing like a mushroom prospering in the collected dung. It was a weird journey filled with excessive people. I'm glad to be past that chapter. The porno industry will tend to make you neurotic, I think, after having worked with some people who really churn it out, and have very specific rules, like a factory. It's just the constant exposure that does it. You're getting the stimulation, things happen to you psychologically and physiologically, and, you know, there's no completion, no recognition of that reality, so it's creating a certain level of frustration, like a short circuit. Looking at the images and all the stimulation you'd have, you're genetically disposed to react but you're not reacting. You're not supposed to be involved in it, you're supposed to be working. If somebody is involved in it they're usually not working for very long. The consumer can exist in a sexual universe but the producer cannot. It's the factory situation, I realised that it was too much. I started noticing people I had worked with a long time, and I thought, well... everyone is a little bit crazy here, and I think I know the reason why! I did *High School Fantasies*, *Beach Blanket Bingo* and some videos under the name of Morris Deal. But after doing two or three, the third time it's like 'Oh no, this is pornography, this is not what I wanted to do, where's the joy in this?' I was thinking in terms of art with *Dirtiest Game*, although I consider myself more like pulp fiction, in terms of effect. The first two films I made were like a fascinating journey into a strange land and reinforced that rebel/black sheep thing. By the third film the fun had worn thin and a not so good feeling of being just an everyday garden-variety pornographer began to colour the experience. Then AIDS put it all in the bad place as far as I was concerned. So I left."

Other things colluded to make working in the porno industry stressful, such as the constant difficulty getting paid, as Bryan explains: "That was everybody's big concern, all the time, so what I wanted was paying up in or a guaranteed amount paid in a certain schedule." Porn's connection to organised crime and the Mafia has been well documented, but Bryan had little direct connection: "I was aware of the mob influence to some degree but it was all very quiet and distant, something to do with the other guys in someplace faraway. I wasn't a threat to any grand empires. But the Godfather craze created a nasty change when wannabe producers with a few bucks started carrying guns and acting tough. That was annoying."

SHE MAKES THE GOOD GUYS HAPPY...
SHE MAKES THE BAD GUYS BLEED!!!

SHE GIVES
GOOD KUNG FU

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**Stalled and Mollified
Boogie Vision and Lady Street Fighter**

The Market Street Studio set-up dissolved in 1974, and Bryan moved to Silverlake on the Eastside of L.A. in 1975, keen to build a new working environment, he set up Bungalow A, an editing facility at Scott Sound in Hollywood ("a place where really bad movies went to die" jokes). Bryan himself was in-house sound effects editor for a variety of projects that came through Bungalow A between '75 and '77 including Bill Rebane's *The Giant Spider Invasion*; Robert Voskanian's *The Child*; Larry Buchanan's *Goodbye Norma Jean*; Frank Packard's *About the First Black Superman*; Don Hulet's *Breaker Breaker!*, one of the many recuts of *Hoffen* (a film that didn't make it into cinemas for another four years); and a Polish import called *The Two Who Stole the Moon*. He also made himself available as second unit production manager for Gene Corman's *Vigilante Force* ("Peter Jamison, who had been the production designer on *High School Fantasies* and *Beach Blanket Bingo*, was now picking up jobs from Gene. Roger and Gene Corman had rented space for props and costumes at Bungalow A," Bryan explains. "Peter had asked Gene into letting him direct the second unit for *the Force* and came to me to be unit production manager. I also did some camera work – sunsets, special effects explosions and the like."

With *The Young Moviemakers* still limping onwards Bryan started *Lady Street Fighter*, an action film with a martial arts slant, starring German-born actress turned writer/producer Renee Harmon. Bryan explains, "For reasons of economy we shot *Lady Street Fighter* with my newly acquired variable speed unblimped 16mm Arriflex. I scratched soundtrack that could be replaced with matched clean re-recorded dialogue track, since Renee had a flat deal with Scott Sound which included dialogue replacement, and so we stayed on budget. While filming, a technician manually adjusted the speed control to be camera as close to constant sound speed as possible. Director Bill Rebane had finished *The Giant Spider Invasion* and was redoing an earlier LFO production" and prepping a picture that required some rock and roll music. We met in the Scott Sound transfer room and traded scores. *High School Fantasies* for the LFO score, which was used on *Lady Street Fighter*.

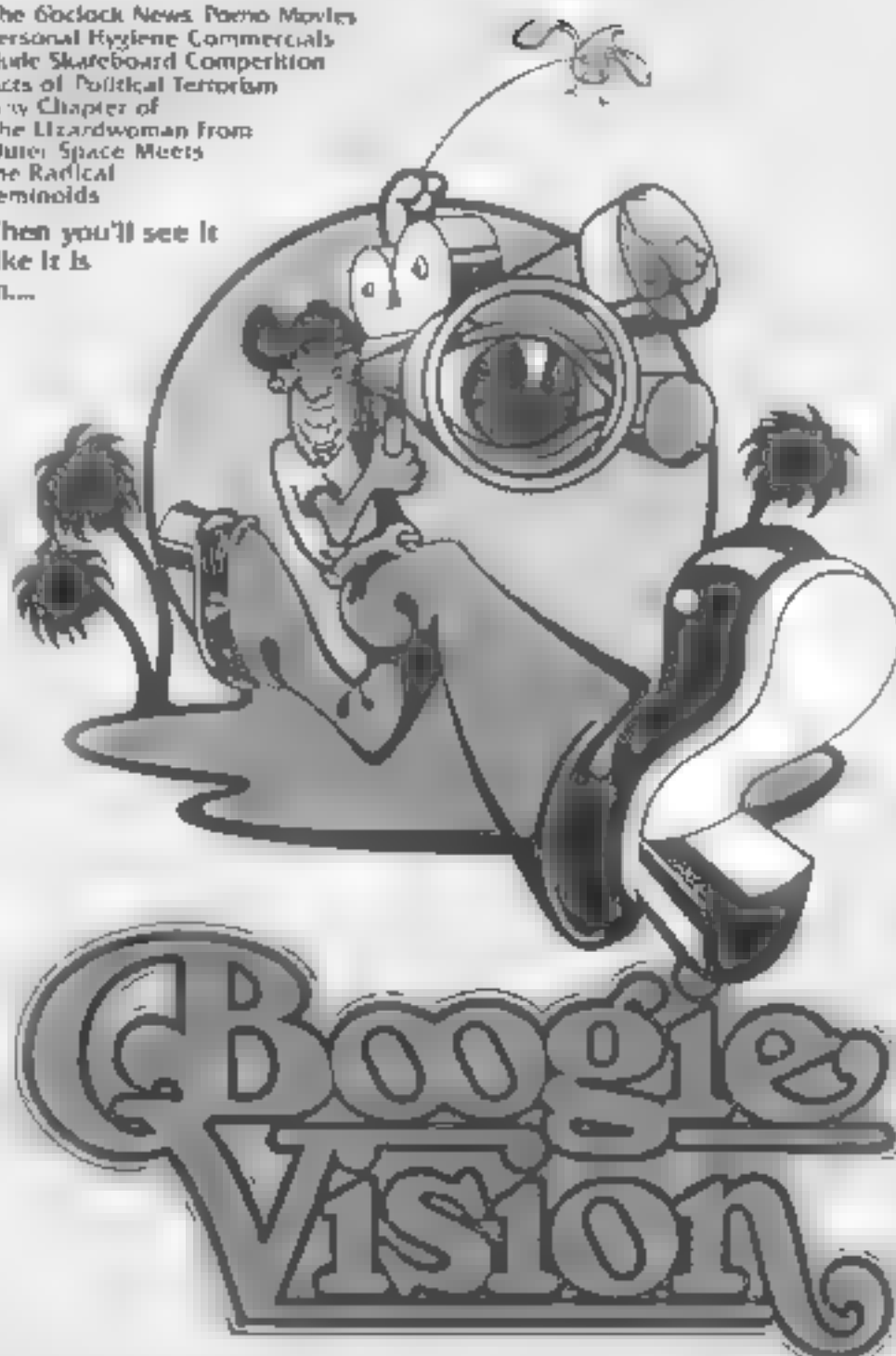
With a version of *Lady Street Fighter* completed in '76, Bryan screened the cut to distributor Harry Novak, whose company *The Child* (see feature elsewhere in this book) was at that time in post-production at Bungalow A. Novak showed interest but then stalled for a year before finally buying the film in '77. During this time, Bryan was not only working at Bungalow A but also working for Brandon Lee at Group I, re-editing Italian theatrical imports for domestic release and assembling their theatrics.

Bryan had many discussions with the veteran distributor and hackster, and he recalls Chase explaining the commercial winds were changing: "He told me all independent distributors were notified in one way or another by the major studios, that the majors would be taking over the independent share of the production and distribution business, essentially putting them out of business by producing the kind of exploitation films that previously had been low-budget summer drive-in movies with studio name casts and studio budgets. Also every drive-in and drive-in would thereafter be considered first

If you laugh out loud during

The Glocks News Porno Movies
Personal Hygiene Commercials
Nude Skateboard Competition
Acts of Political Terrorism
Any Chapter of
The Lizardwoman From
Outer Space Meets
the Radical
Feminoids

**Then you'll see it
like it is
in...**



starring Michael Landon Marlene Seisman Bert Belant and introducing Frank Miller
A James Bryan Films Release In color R

run or dedicated to major studio product, thus eliminating all the screens that had been available for Indy's product. The studios' Indy squeeze would be interrupted in a few years by the home video revolution, which effectively derailed their plans of total domination, but only for a decade or so. Their dream of ultimate control was soon back on track until the present-day film business became truly international and the rules changed yet again."

Bryan's headaches were just beginning with *Lady Street Fighter*, but in 1977 he did at last manage to leave his pet project *The Young Moviemakers* over the finishing line. Six years on from its inception, however, times had really changed, and Bryan's adult-movie comedy satire was out of date. After showing the fine cut to just about every distributor or studio in Hollywood, and finding no interest, he recut, reshot and retitled it as *Boogie Vision*. The

Boogie Vision was Bryan's attempt to satirise modern media culture, and the porno scene. Can a movie featuring a film-wizardwoman from Outer Space Meets the Radical Feminoids be anything marvellous? Certainly, if you're influenced poster art suggests we're missing something. Sadly, *Boogie Vision* remains extremely difficult to see.

templates for this new version were *The Grange Tube* (1974), at the time a ground-breaking spoof on TV, directed by Ken Shapiro, and *Tunnlevision* (1976), its immediate successor rip-off. "The first company I signed with was Crest, from L.A.," he explains. "They did a few dates, started building it up. Then Universal, who had picked up *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977) and discovered they didn't know how to release it's offbeat satire, approached Jerry Persell at Crest with a sweet business deal he couldn't refuse. The unfortunate part for me, and *Boogie Vision*, was that Jerry had to be exclusive to *The Kentucky Fried Movie* and he regretfully told me, in the nicest of terms, I was being dropped. So I decided to try releasing *Boogie Vision* myself, using the education I had received from working at Group 1, having listened closely in those long conversations with Brandon Chase.

Bryan sighs. "I released it through my own company, but it didn't appear in the right publications to be noticed. Releasing it solo destroyed my bank balance to such a degree that when Peter Turner offered me an option on the *Alien* script for \$100 I had to pass and gave him the number of the guy who was putting together *The First Wives Club*."

Peter Turner was an up-and-coming writers' agent newly arrived from Chicago, and he brought with him a school chum called Garth Flasser. Turner talked himself onto the crew and provided talent, including Flasser, to handle pick-up shots for the restructured *Boogie Vision*. It was this association that brought Bryan and Flasser together, and the two of them would shortly go on to create *Don't Go in the Woods* in the State of Utah, home of the friendly and smiling Mormon Church.

Life Among the 'Destroying Angels'

Working around Bungalow A in 1977 was Craig Hall, an employee of Sunshine Releasing, a company that immediately felt the effects of the 'Indy Squeeze' Brandon Chase had described. Says Bryan, "He saw his job disappearing and explained to me there was still business here and there, and if he could pick up some reasonable product there was yet a little money to be made. I went to Charles Ver Hagen, a producer and job owner who would sometimes bankroll films, and explained our plan. He agreed to give us several of his not-so-recent films that had been sitting on the shelf for a while. The titles included Curtis Harrington's *The Killing Kind*, and *Messiah of Evil* by Gloria Katz and Willard Huyck. New advertising was printed, the dates set, the prints shipped, but difficulties with collections soon had Craig back in Houston surviving as an accountant. I'm sure Mr. Ver Hagen saw some money but I never did, and Craig wouldn't discuss it. After getting pay dates around the country, and knowing collections would be a long wait, I jumped at the chance to take a sound effects job at Schick-Sunn Classics in Salt Lake City, on the *Grizzly Adams* TV series."

Bryan worked on the Utah-based TV production *Grizzly Adams* for three seasons. At that time, Schick-Sunn Classics (often referred to as Sunn Classics) were thriving, producing "NBC Movies of the Week" and TV pilots like *The Deerslayer*, *Earthbound*, *Nancy Drew* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Bryan was involved with both the broadcast and theatrical output, editing sound effects on docu-features like *Bevans' Death's Door*, *Encounter with Disaster*, *The Lincoln Conspiracy* and *The Bermuda*

Triangle. He explains the set-up: "Sunn Classics released high concept Nature Bible and UFO theatrical docu-dramas, using a 'four-wall' deal with theatres, essentially renting the auditorium at a flat rate and covering all other expenses, spending large sums on advertising, heavy on TV spots, to get a huge viewer turn out, then keeping all the ticket sales. It was a very successful strategy for a few years. Entrepreneur Patrick Frawley got into the 'four wall' game with a nature show starring Dan Haggerty about Siberian tigers, and after making a generous investment in a small Utah production company, Sun Pictures, he subsequently took control, renamed it Schick-Sunn Classics and set out to produce a theatrical docu-drama, *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*, starring animal-handler/actor/producer Dick Robinson. In the course of shooting, Dick Robinson was badly injured by a bear, Charles Seliger, who began making airline safety films in Denver before producing nature shows for Sunn, stepped in as Frawley's agent, recast the film with Dan Haggerty and had it completely reshoot. Seliger's successful formula got the attention of Fred Silverman at NBC and so the *Grizzly Adams* series was born. Frawley believed Dick Robinson broke his contract and advised him to sue if he thought he had any money coming out of the deal." That's when I showed up in that second team of sound effects editors. My boss left Salt Lake, and the series, at the end of that season, and I stepped into the supervisor spot with instructions to use local editors. NBC was throwing one contract after another at Sunn Classics for TV specials, mini-series and Movies of the Week. Since the only qualified local editors were already on staff, I picked from the untrained and had to train them very quickly. The first lesson was that the film used to space out or fit, between sound effects had two different sides, a clean or cell side and a coated or emulsion side. The second lesson was how to splice two ends of this film with tape while matching the two sides. Next, the film was wound onto thousands-foot reels, with the cell, or clear side up or exposed on the roll of film. And so simple step by simple step the training progressed. Developing the physical skills with various pieces of equipment was a matter of basic repetition and each trainee was instructed to notify me when they were ready to progress to the next level. Our little sound editors' handbook that I put together to keep each sound editor's work consistent within the department was passed on to the Sound Department at Paramount to train their new people."

Bryan spent four years working for Seliger at Schick-Sunn Classics. His recollections of the unusual pressures working there offer a glimpse into a world within a world, within a world: the Mormon American Film Industry. "In Salt Lake City, at the time I arrived to work for Sunn Classics, the Mormon Church was charging to accommodate a faction of its young membership who were not fitting into the standard image of the young Mormon. Following up on the popularity of Donny and Marie Osmond, the approved Farrah Fawcett hair-do could be replaced by the short and perky Marie Osmond cut. The Donny style in men's fashion, seen in *American Gigolo*, was accepted as well. The Church had a boys and girls youth auxiliary where teenagers were taught proper grooming, which turned out to be a bit of a joke outside Utah since it was stuck in the Brady Bunch mould. Also this conformity marginalized the growing geek or nonconforming academic types, so the Church started a separate

exceptional weirdos and updated the standard training for socialization. Since the old school was driving kids away from the Church, too might think that if you suggested a film about the Mormon Church and its revered founders, you would align yourself with the establishment. "Many Mormon people have proposed projects about the very popular Porter Rockwell, but all have been persuaded not to do that even the most elite."

At the time, I was a member of the Utah Film Society. I had the idea and shut up observations. While I was working at Sunnyside, Charles Seftler converted to the Church, as many have. Successful businesses there find it wise to do so. I persisted in trying to link the film industry to the broader cinema establishment. "In 1981 I was a founding member of the Utah Association of Motion Picture and Television Artists (LAMPFTA) and was a member of the Magazine Committee. I didn't realize at the time, contrary to the bylaws, the true purpose of the organization was to control and limit production in Utah, making sure people kept a tight grasp on the film business. Since I got lots of people to pay dues and I thought we should deliver the Association's magazine, we were serious about promoting the film business. When it came time for the magazine to start, the rest of the committee was too busy, so I just went ahead, thinking that once it was going other members could take over, since I really didn't want to do it anyway. I sold all the ads, got the printer, got the articles written in Utah, got photos together."

Already I mailed copies out to the members and to managers in L.A. and dumped copies at labs and distributors too. The effort to pass out free issues at the Sundance Film Festival (which evolved into the Sundance Film Festival) was quickly ruled to be too much trouble, and so they left at the door with their cartons. When the Church came in for a subscription after I had set up other members over the second issue, the officers got nervous and became involved. The third issue was seized down by the news censors and it was allowed to be after the fourth issue. In response I organized Salt Lake City's Midnight Movie Series with titles like *F for Fake*, *W for Wengeance*, *Rock n Roll High School* and *Mae West's Sextette*, to raise money for LAMPFTA. The program had a specially honoured short film by a filmmaker. I shot a trailer promoting the series and, to my success, but there was fallout. All the Salt Lake City movie chains responded by having their own midnight series. The management of the building got heat because of the negative reception for the local filmmakers would be a bar downstairs. Finally, LAMPFTA rescinded any involvement and demanded that their name be removed from all ads and posters. When I was too much trouble for Sunnyside Classics it was time for me to go. I hired my first and last African-American employee, an editor named the Elks Club across the street from the Elks Club, so I could have a Department lunch at the Elks Club. The Elks Club, since the 1970s, had a black editor. The local Elks Order had to hold a special regional meeting to get organization approval for the integration of their restaurant-bar. Seftler and pals were doing lots of movies over-budget, since the

company was put up for sale at its earnings peak and certain people were creating production problems to throw money at. As post-production supervisor I was being hit by these annoying major roadblocks. When I finally tumbled in the turnaround scheme and spoke to one of the players they moved me out of the stooge's spot and soon eased me out altogether. I blew no whistles nor threatened the established order of the day. Just took my paycheck and said my thanks. The film business is the film business.

Into the Woods

Shot in the summer of 1980 during Bryan's seven-month sojourn in Utah, *Don't Go in the Woods* is a low-budget, ramshackle horror picture with a devil-may-care approach to story construction, and lots of gory deaths. The story concerning two couples on a camping holiday who run into a maniacal mountain man while trekking through the Rockies, may lack originality, but it plays the slasher horror game to the hilt and proved to be Bryan's most visible and commercially successful picture.

Bryan was thirsty for a successful theatrical release. *Bongre Vision* had foundered and his career had gravitated towards more and more work on other people's projects. An "overcome all odds" approach was essential. "I really wanted to make a general release theatrical picture that would play nationally through a regular distributor," he says. There was just one extra proviso: "It had to be done with no money! Or at least with the money I had. I bought out-of-date raw stock that was slated to be sold for the reclaimable silver in the emulsion. The cost was under \$500 with shipping. A major coup. The lab really had to strive to get acceptable colour but they made it work. It was very cheap. And it tickled me to finish it that way."

Initially it was the existence of a new cut of *Lady Street Fighter* that made *Don't Go in the Woods* possible. Bryan explains: "In order to connect from sub-distributors who needed the next picture to be ready to go into release before the subs would let go of your money, sort of the reverse of a ransom. They had to have product to survive, so naturally any money they let go of, by the Law of the Indies, it had to be going to a source of new pictures. Working

in L.A. I was able to recruit *Lady Street Fighter* and make a trailer that would ensure a release on the kung fu circuit, and then found a place for it in an oversubscribed tax shelter package. So Renee Harmon and I sold out and split the cash. A few subs, seeing I was still producing product, let go of some more cash. Renee and I both started separate production companies, since she was in L.A. and I was in Salt Lake City."¹²

Bryan decided upon a horror film set in the Rocky Mountains, with the scenery providing production value. Shooting on outdoor locations would save money on lighting, so he opted for a story based on local rumours about a number of hikers who were said to have fallen victim to a suspected serial killer. Peter Turner heard the word back in L.A.: "He had Garth send me an outdoor script about hikers in danger and also recommended talent who would travel to Salt Lake on their own dime." Bryan recalls, adding dryly: "So Garth became a victim twice, once on screen and simultaneously behind the scenes as I rewrote his script with a vicious disregard for his artistic integrity."

The shooting schedule was arranged to make careful use of resources, and with a storyline based around four campers as leads, and a succession of unrelated secondary victims, it made sense to begin shooting each individual

... saving the assembled cast shots for last. "At first we shot for a couple of months, mostly weekends, using local actors," says Bryan. "The store owner in the scene with the sheriff was the head of a local casting company. Finally we got the main cast assembled and shot the rest in under two weeks, with a couple of down days to recover our breath and prepare for the finish. The locations were spread around a bit but we always made it back to Salt Lake for the evenings. It was a struggle in the mountains because of the altitude - we were always out of breath. Coming back down to Salt Lake really left everybody fatigued. We worked above the snake line in the mountains so we didn't worry about the rattlesnakes, which meant the mice were a plague as far as catering was concerned. We were usually on our way home when the porcupines came out, and after dark we could hear some larger furry friends, but we never met them face to face."

Don't Go in the Woods has a gloriously high body count, and the murders are frequently as grisly as one could wish for in such a low-budget production. "I really enjoyed the bloody violence," says Bryan, "believing it stayed safe in a fun or comic zone. Only one scene, once it was edited, crossed the line for me and created a very disturbing reaction, like the scene of a bloody accident or a factual medical record of a crime. That was the killing of Joanne. It was cut out and brought down the level of horror to something that would be seen as entertainment, not some bit of police evidence material. The special effects were really simple and really cheap, but for whatever reason that killing woke the *Mark of the Devil*, you know, too far." Later, back in the cabin room, Bryan also realised he had inadvertently shot an homage to Orson Welles in the Joanne-slasher sequence. "It was only later, once I had cut it and saw the way I shot it, that I realised I was replicating, unintentionally, Akim Tamiroff's death in *Touch of Evil*, you know, trying to get up through the window. When I saw it later I thought, 'Oh no, what have I done!'"

When shooting wrapped, there were problems getting post-production money together at which point Bryan's sister Suzette and her husband Roberto Gomez entered the picture as producers. "We got the film in the can and had no budget left for the lab costs. Suzette, who hustled up costumes (helped by artist wife who sculpted the blood and body parts and special effect devices), was married to a forest ranger from Louisiana. Roberto Gomez, at this moment, Roberto was hired by a major corporation in Texas. They bought a house, sold their trailer and decided to invest the new cash in *Don't Go in the Woods*."

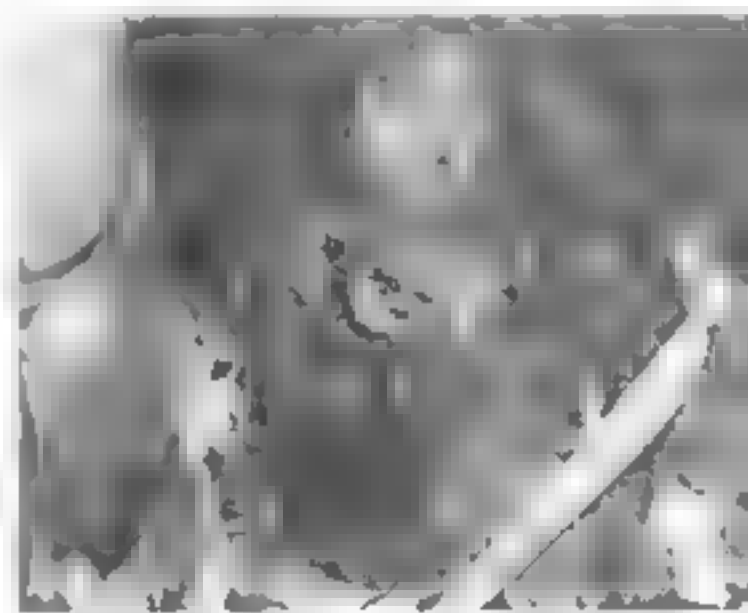
For the score, Bryan turned to H. Kingsley Thurber and his primitive but distinctive contributions really help to sell the film. "When I started out with H. Kingsley Thurber he was in this groove of writing music for industrial films," recalls Bryan, "sort of cheerful and bland. He started writing cues and I said, 'This isn't going to work, we can maybe use it on a few hiking scenes but mostly I think we should go to John Carpenter's notebook and replicate his cues' - obviously in the way Thurber would do it, but that was the approach. He really had a good time doing it; it was like a release for him because he could do anything he wanted to. He gave me cues for different scenes and I used them or moved them around, doubled them up. Looking at the film, I thought okay, it's gotta have a lot of music. I tried to use it all. Looking back at it maybe I went too far, but at the time I thought, I'll just keep going, do it scene by scene and not

worry about progression so much. After *Woods*,

Fit to Screen and *Don't Go in the Woods* share several cues - including one very distinctive sound: the deranged bedspring. Bryan knows it well: "Thurber was a quiet-spoken fellow with a dry sense of humour - he referred to the cue you liked as 'Steel Pulse', in that it was made with a steel guitar distortion. I wasn't around for it recording so I don't know how he made it do what it did."

Post-production was fine, but Bryan found the actual shoot less enjoyable than it had been on his previous movies, as he explains: "*Don't Go in the Woods* was the most difficult film that I had made. It just happens that each film has a character to it - problems happen in a certain vein, everything follows a certain line. That film was almost impossible to make, with all kinds of trouble. I did have some problems with actors. The psychology of the acting population had changed. The reason I was making films was no longer possible, and I was approaching things in an antique way. I thought everyone should enjoy making movies, that you couldn't help but enjoy making a film. People wanted something different out of it. Garth was very upset because I chose to put in some scenes that he would never put in. I was interested in certain things, wrote a scene so that characters could deal with them. At the time and place we were shooting there was an acknowledgement of urban myths. I included an urban myth in campfire story, which nobody in the cast, and Garth who was in the crew - wanted to do. Garth was upset and perturbed, and lobbied with the cast not to do it."

The scene Bryan is referring to - in which a quartet play at scare stories round the campfire - is atrociously acted; the reason becomes clearer as Bryan reveals they were essentially sulking at its inclusion and trying to mess it up. However, their strategy backfired: they had not reckoned with Bryan's temperament. "It's when actors want a close-up to be used," he explains, "they'll give a bad performance in the three shots!" This spoiler technique, used so blatantly by the leading players cut no ice with Bryan: "They didn't see it as drama, or whatever. I think they were hoping I wouldn't use the scene. They were dealing with the wrong person. My sister and I got in trouble telling actors this. It's your face that's going to be up there on the screen, so if you want to give a bad performance, and do it wrong, be my guest! They're not gonna be thinking I'm lousy as a director, they're going to be thinking you're lousy." And some people really don't appreciate that!





key to the cast's ill grace, according to Bryan, was arriving with unrealistic expectations, especially about the financial status of the production. "I did a lot of [things], getting away with stuff on the budget. They didn't like the Arriflex. It made their experience of filming less than Hollywood. I was recording a scratch track, and that was so something they were not familiar with. It wasn't a [thing], it was a little Sony, stereo, with one track recording, not pulse off the camera, but it worked. All I know is spend as little money as you can and you move as fast as you can, but they didn't get it. All the cast dubbed selves, except one of the victims. I had to dub Frank [Frank Stallone], who played Dick, the guy with the van, myself. I've known him all of my life and he's been in nearly all of my films. I thought I could do it, but it went way beyond me. He has a real comic delivery, but I think I

was over. Many practical and monetary pressures coming down on the production, there was no way of trying to let a handful of pernickety actors in. My attitude is to finish. The harder they argued / pushed, and ultimately it was okay. It took seven days total for the four of them, but for a few days everybody accepted it. I think they were just over.

Garth Ellissen on *Don't Go in the Woods*

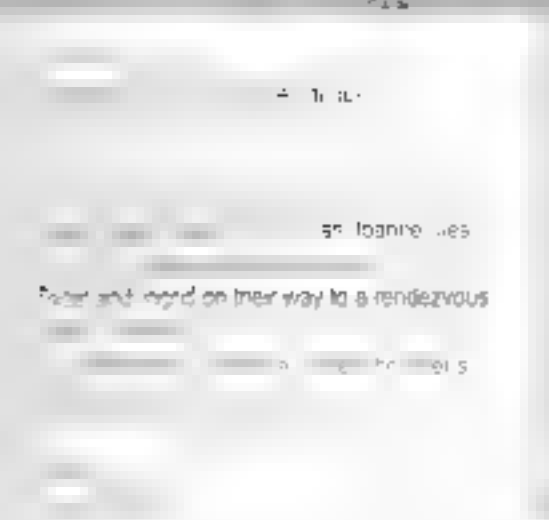
I contacted Garth Ellissen, the writer of *Don't Go in the Woods* in 2003. No longer active in the industry, he is an amiable man with a great deal of warmth towards his progeny. He knows that his script could well have been the one to reach genre heaven; after all, it preceded *Friday the 13th* and anticipates its setting. Slasher stories set in the woods milled around in the late 1970s like spermatozoa vying to fertilize the commercial egg. Sean Cunningham was the lucky donor, but he made it to the finish line by the mere swish of a protozoic tail, metaphorically speaking.

Ellissen describes the genesis of *Don't Go in the Woods*, called *Sierra* at its script stage. It was originally a brutal survival film taking place in the Sierra when some backpackers become lost. I remember as a child, going camping and snuggling in our sleeping bags around the fire late into the night, telling ghost stories and scaring each other. The shadows and darkness in the trees beyond the flickering firelight. We knew that an "it" was watching but we couldn't see them. Your imagination would run wild with gruesome thoughts, but the morning always came and the fears of the previous night disappeared. *Sierra* told the story of what would happen if those worst fears suddenly

Don't Go in the Woods
from the book
Bryan Ellissen
be impaled
Gerry Klein
and the other

More Woods story

James Bryan as the killer in this behavior



became a reality. (*Jaws* did the same thing with the ocean, it was a good script, and the first of its kind. *Friday the 13th* and all the others would come later.)

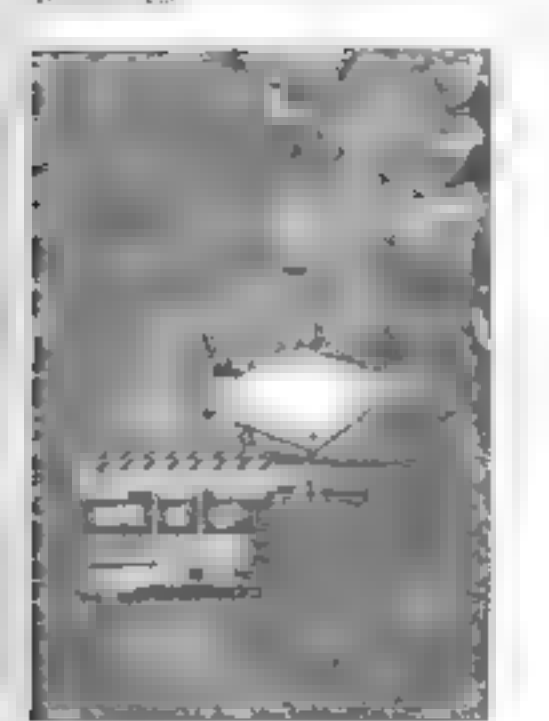
Flasssen appears in the film as a cop, although he is modest about his acting. "I'm available as a sleeping extra (my specialty) in any motion picture! I first met Jim Bryan when he was making *Boxing Vision* and my wife and I had a scene emerging from a car and looking at a piece of property—but that was pretty complicated. During the filming of *Boxing* he coerced me into playing a sheriff's deputy in the background. That was complicated, too. He first wanted me to be a victim, but I refused because I didn't want to get killed in my own movie. A friend of ours, Eric Jenkins, who helped the production by repacking the film canisters (a busy job because we were shooting with short tail ends), got poked by the spear instead. The actors in roles are the most active I've ever had. Now I refuse to play difficult parts, and will certainly never speak in a movie. I work cheap. SAC in uniforms—in my sleeping roles," he laughs. "I'm usually paid in cash."

Flasssen remembers his first meeting with Bryan: "I read *Sierra* and decided to buy it. Lenore and I drove to Salt Lake City to meet the Bryans and get more information. I wanted to make any rewrites or changes to the script that I wanted. The main thing he wanted was more murders. I need to have things spelled out, so I wanted to know how many. Bryan was reluctant to commit to an exact number, kept pressing. Finally, out of frustration I guess, he said something like 'Fourteen.' So I went back to Sonoma and added a bunch of murders. I don't think I added as many as he wanted. I was also under the impression that he had a fairly high budget, so I wrote more description than I would have. I'd known it was going to be done with hardly any money (Bryan had a backer pull out at the last minute). At any rate, I did two rewrites. My script was about 110 pages

When we showed up for filming Jim gave our handwritten scripts, about thirty or forty pages long. Everything was trimmed. It was quite a surprise, but what did I know?"

Flasssen feels that, despite their differences of opinion, Bryan deserves credit for the work he put in: "Jim and Kathie Bryan worked the hardest, probably averaging a couple of hours sleep per night. The rest of us had it pretty easy. Jim and Kathie offered us their house to stay in, but that would have been too crowded for me. I moved into a local motel and most of the out-of-town cast and crew followed. I had some quiet time every day. Jim Bryan is a grand part of the low-budget film. He is a bit compulsive, I think, and possibly the process itself is to him more important than quality of the finished product. But he is a genius. And anyone with \$40,000 who wants to make a movie can't be done. He deserves to get the funding and a good script to direct a real film, and I hope he gets it some day. The problem with shooting a low-budget is that you only get one take. I don't like to cut scenes. I usually get it right. So usually it's not right. Also, in a low-budget movie the sound and processing is the largest cost, and actors are usually paid very little or not at all. With a real budget, that reverses and the amount of film is not a consideration so the number of takes increase and the quality rises. He did the best he could with the pittance of a budget he had to do it with."

Flasssen adds: "We first saw *Don't Go in the Woods* at some strange screening room in a dive in downtown L.A. During the filming I'd had a fight with one of the actors, who had just graduated from some damned method acting school and was way overplaying his lines. I tried to tell him he didn't have to come so much because the effect of the camera was to bring him much closer and so he didn't need to come too close to the camera. He thought I didn't know what I was talking about. In the first ten minutes of the screening he leaned over to me and said, 'I'm sorry. You were right.'







The Renee Harmon Years, and the Return of Morris Deal

By the time *Don't Go in the Woods* wrapped, Renee Harmon and Frank Roach's L.A. production *Frozen Scream* was also in the can. Bryan arranged for *Frozen Scream*'s post-production to take place in Salt Lake City early in 1983—shooting pickups and cutaways as needed.

Bryan's creative relationship with Renee Harmon, who passed away in 2006, was one of the most important of his life. Even today, several failed or underfunded projects down the line, he remains full of admiration: "Renee, a 100% determination. As a producer, she was unstoppable. As an actress she was above and a trouper and knew no fear. When Renee came looking for a deal for post-sound for her \$20,000 script, Bruce Scott sent her over to me in Longwood A. Renee had persuaded her acting students to invest their first acting jobs in a production she would star in as well as produce; then they could all have a film of themselves. Asked if I believed it was do-able, I said yes up to a point, and showed her how to go through shooting and editing to the first fine cut, ready for viewing by a distributor. Renee absorbed it all and came out of her first film hungry for more. She grew with each production and ultimately published a number of how-to books on producing your own low-budget movie."¹³

The marketing of *Frozen Scream* led Renee Harmon to a company called TransWorld (soon to be absorbed by 21st Century Cinema Corp.). In 1983 they agreed to fund two more pictures, the first of these being *The Executioner Part II* (1983), an unofficial sequel to *The Executioner* (1980), James Glickenhaus's efficient B-plus about a vigilante taking on rapists and mafia scumbags in New York. Harmon called Bryan back to direct it, but *The Executioner Part II* proved to be a hasty affair, made under difficult financial conditions, with an inexperienced crew and a constantly changing script. The resulting mess, though enjoyable, is probably the closest thing to a *horror* "bad" movie Bryan has made.

A vigilante known as "The Executioner" is on the loose in L.A. His targets? The low-life rapists and scumbags of the city. His slogan? "All the Way!" This puts him at odds with both the police and the Syndicate News reporter Celia Amherst (Renee Harmon) is investigating the case, as is Detective Roger O'Malley (Chris Mcham), who comes to suspect his ex-Vietnam buddy Mike (Antonie John Mottet). Unbeknownst to O'Malley, his daughter Laura has a drug habit, which brings her in contact with Antonio Casales, a gangland boss and sexual sadist known to the city's hookers as "The Taroo Man." Casales sends one of his minions to kill Mike, but Mike overpowers him and forces him to reveal who he's working for. Casales has Laura abducted for one of his sex-and-torture sessions, but her friend Betty witnesses Laura being bundled into a car by one of Casales's pimps, and passes on the information to Celia. Casales then has Celia abducted too, who will come to the rescue—Cop or Executioner?

Amid the rubble of this impoverished production, there are still a few scenes that stand out. I treasure the moment when Renee Harmon stabs one of Casales's henchmen with a samurai sword, pinning him to a couch. A few seconds later Mike bursts in, and the victim tries to grab them with the settler still pinned to his back, looking like an apoplectic steroid man. The minimal sex scenes and threats



me at the climax is a killer like early Human League
ers Dave Brubeck. And there is one scene that enters
the pantheon of Top 100 strangest cinema moments, as
Laura and her college girlfriend Kitty get stoned on grass
le through a swathe of poorly dubbed dialogue
ish this was coke. oh, heavenly coke"'). Kitty's
nupture, insistent laugh, a bovine hurh-hurh-hurh!!! is
rth the video rental fee all by itself, and for a short
hile you feel as stoned as the characters.

The Executioner Part II is the most primitive and
adhere of all Bryan's real films: its technical flaws
and lack of polish are impossible to ignore. The sound-
ing is the worst offender: it's obvious that Bryan, a
killed sound-editor himself, had no time to begin a
decent assembly: the audio is riddled with frequent bald
hes where basic Foley and ambient tracks are missing,
ing the dubbed dialogue hovering against the audio
nt of a blank canvas. It has to be said that Bryan's
cclusions are probably cheaper on a dollar-for-
dollar basis, but they're conceived as dramas, not action-
adventure. What sinks *Executioner* is that its reach so
adly exceeds its grasp. To a film for spectacle on a budget
his low, with Vietnam battle scenes similar to those in
any number of its war knockoffs, was brave, but
doomed to failure. I don't think I'm being mean if I say
that the Vietnam scenes lack a certain verisimilitude: the
ne helicopter on show is a sleek black number that was
probably more in demand for ferrying L.A. celebrities to
swanky parties than shipping troops into a war zone!

ly damages the film, though, more than any
deficiencies in budget: it's the acting: why is it that low-
budget flicks in the 1980s always seem to feature
professly unconvinced street gangs? And why do the
yrs supposedly street-hardened girlfriends always look
ke Cyndi Lauper, or The Bangles? Bryan is lumbered
here with a posse of L.A. queens wearing leather jackets
ed up at the sleeves. Danger is not really part of the r-
ide: they brandish a flick-knife with all the enthusiasm
f a gay man helping a woman insert a tampon. Actually,
liked the scene in a convenience store where these naïf
todlums smear the middle-aged proprietors with food
before beating them up: everyone is so careful, not to
ush anything and bankrupt the production that they
ardly dare move, their 'violent' gestures as prim and
hibited as a nervous ballet class. The actor playing
Larsen is fairly menacing, and you can believe he's a
anger to women, but the film founders on the rocks of
Antoine John Mottel's performance as Mike, his wild
gymnastic and *Planet of the Apes*-style bodily contortions
show, I guess, an admirable commitment to physical
ing, but... well, let's just say he could have done with
a bit more rehearsal.

Bryan is frank about what went wrong with the
duction: *Executioner II* was difficult. That was a
tuation where Renee got the money, she put the crew
together, and then I showed up. Most of the cast and crew
were willing, but they had never been involved in
a serious production. The cameraman was a studio
cameraman for a TV station, he'd done some work but
not much. He could operate the camera but he didn't
know about the aspect ratio, or taking a light reading, as
he was used to a studio environment, where everything
was set. So we just started and I said, "Okay, here's what
we're going to do..." So I started taking the equipment
out of the trunk and setting it up, saying this is how you

do it, this is how you load the film, this is how you set up
the camera, this is how you set up the lights, and they
sort of picked it up.

As if nurse-minding a crew of novices wasn't enough,
Bryan had to contend with executive producers who
wanted their product the day before. "The time ran out.
We had to deliver, we couldn't wait, we were bound to
over a reel at a time. The people who put up the money,
Art Schweitzer and friend, operated a company out of
New York called Cinevest, who distributed such items as
Brett Piper's *Mutant War*."!

Harmon's script was originally called *Crime Fighter*
until Schweitzer's company demanded a change, to tie the
film in with *The Exterminator*. "That was a picture that
could get booked," Bryan explains, "it was playing in
Europe. We had European money and the European
distributors wanted certain elements. They'd say, 'You've
got to have this, we need more helicopters, so we would
go and shoot more of what they wanted. They would tell
Renee, and Renee would tell me. The problem for me
with Renee's script was we had no budget, and so I had to
work out how to get *anything* on the screen. It was not
easy! We needed explosions, and so a tin that once held
olive oil was opened top and bottom, coated on the inside
with rubber cement, mounted in front of the camera lens,
set alight and hair spray was shot into the flames to create
a miniature foreground explosion for combat scenes.
was reacting to the experience, I was not 'in charge' in
any way. I did what I could - it was like reflex
filmmaking. It was written way beyond what we could do.
The shoot was two weeks, post-production another two
weeks." Bryan drafted some friends from Salt Lake City
to work on the movie. "I said, 'We don't have any money,
but if you want to start a job in L.A. thinking that you'll
get other jobs, this is the one to do, I'll hire you, we'
just bang it out,' and they did. Chris Mitchum really made
it work. He was there, he showed up, and I thought, oh
great, this is what happens when someone actually knows
what they're doing! I didn't expect that, but I was glad to
be surprised. I was surprised that it worked at all, or that
anybody accepted it."



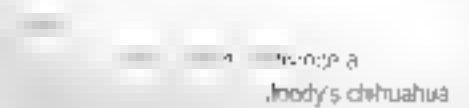
After ten years making horror for
sex films and far-out satires, Bryan returned
to the action template of *Lady Street Fighter*
with *The Executioner Part II* (1985), once
again starring the incomparable Renee
Harmon. The film was released on video in
the UK by Pyramid, who were indirectly
also responsible for putting out Don Jones's
The Forest (see page 16).

So pretty, so innocent, so demure... who
would suspect that Laura Bianca P...
craves hard drugs even as she hones her...



James Bryan, Renee Harmon

Director of *Hellriders*, 1984



Revenge of a
body's delirium



The second Renee Harmon project Bryan directed in 1984 was *Hellriders*. This tale of murdering bikers making life miserable for the townsfolk of a dusty desert town is my least favourite of Bryan's films. It's not as technically dishevelled as *Executioner Part II*, but it's nowhere near as much fun either: the story, involving

Batman, Adam West and one-time *Gilligan's Island* star Tina Louise, is simply tedious, and the relatively minor role for Renee Harmon deprives fans of her unique screen presence. The film has the feel of a Ted V. Mikels production, lacking the extremes of Bryan's best work and conveying nothing but an aimless wandering through uninteresting locations. The *Hellriders* themselves lack menace, and besides, the biker movie cycle was a really long played out, having overstretched its palette in the late sixties and early seventies.

Desperate to keep the momentum going, Bryan returned to his earlier form with Renee Harmon, *Lady Street Fighter*. "Originally I was supposed to get the film on the way, do a cut so that we could show it to the distributors, and the idea was that the distributor would finish it. But after the years went by and it wasn't going anywhere I said okay, let's finish it. I spent my money, I tried not to spend any! I had some stock left over from other things. I invented an extra Carradine brother. Trace Carradine - on *Lady Street Fighter* because sub-distributors don't want to give bookings without a name and any Carradine brother was a name that would sell tickets. By the way David Carradine's daughter Calista has an uncredited minor part in *Boogie Vision*."

With 'legit' mate' productions drying up, Bryan decided it was time for 'Morris Deal' to put food on the table again so *Bizarre Encounters* (1986) and *Sex Aliens* (1987) marked an eighties bloom for the director of *High School Fantasies* and *Beach Blanket Bingo*. "Bizarre Encounters was a video effort to make S&M seem fun," Bryan explains. "The stars, Nick Random and Tamala, wanted

everybody to enjoy something they found very comfortable and fun. No real sex, that's what they wanted. I took whack at it." Well, indeed. Fun certainly seems to have been the watchword: having seen a few screen grabs from this production, I was startled to recognize none other than Miss Piggy, lover of Kermit and formidable dominatrix in her own right, embroiled in the action. What madness was this? Bryan explains how he came to work with perhaps the biggest star of his career. "It was shot at an S&M club in Hollywood and the Miss Piggy mask was part of the club fantasy outfits, mostly because the club's not a permanent property picked up by one of Jim Henson's investment companies. When Henson's people found out, they discreetly arranged for the club to move to a new non-Muppet location."

Bryan made two Morris Deal videos for porno kingpins Caballero Home Video, *Swedish Erotica 73* (1986) and *Sex Aliens* (1987). Both were co-directed with Ted Garley aka Lilo Appleby. About his co-director, Bryan notes, "He had worked with Ed Wood, suggested an idea for a musical, 'The Ed Wood Story', with production numbers transforming his low-budget scenes into dream visions of MC M-level quality, but it hit him the wrong way. He said Ed Wood was a great director and had taught him all he knew about filmmaking." Bryan has much to add about this shady figure. "I think he's shy of any attention either legal or overly non-legal," he laughs. "The

Justice Department once characterized him as 'a general in the army of pornography.'" Bryan Deal also added to his straight-to-video filmography with *Phone Sex Girls* (1987), shot and then edited together with another director's work, and given a wraparound by porno specialist John T. Bone, whose name is the only one to turn up on the credits, and *Two on the Rack* (1990), possibly his most difficult to trace porno movie, being another vehicle for SM maestros Nick Random and Mistress Tamala.

The same year saw yet another attempt to make some money from the now elderly *Lady Street Fighter* concept *Revenge of Lady Street Fighter* (1990). Bryan admits, "A rehash of *Lady Street Fighter* with twenty minutes' new scenes bringing in the character of Renee's niece in trouble, so Renee retells the original story. It was a video release and rights were sold to Korea, but the US video company went bankrupt before a cassette was shipped. *Lady Street Fighter*'s long and chequered journey from its inception in 1976 to this final manifestation in 1990 makes it Bryan's most nagging and troublesome production. Many would simply have put it aside and forgotten about it, but as Bryan explains, "Because of my personality I have a need to finish, I haven't always finished every film, but that's the strongest part. I have to finish. Many times, the experience has led me to another point of view, or something else is more important, then I really have to force myself to finish it, because the film is not the same as originally intended."

Jim Bryan Today

In the nineties, directing work finally dried up. Bryan concentrated on post-production jobs, and toured a number of old film acquisitions (including Peter Sarsgaard's teenage-crewed seventies sci-fi *The Varnish Mission*, and an ultra-obscure slasher - try finding a reference to it anywhere else! - called *Perkament of Terror* by Bobby Davis) at the international film markets. In 1994 he set up

to release some of his early work on video. With his old friend Titus Moody, Bryan developed *Titus Moody's Cult Classics*, featuring Titus himself (and Chi-Chi, his pet Chihuahua) introducing films like *The Dirtiest Game in the World*, *Escape to Pinxton*, and *I Love You I Love You Not*, plus Moody's own debut as director, *Outlaw Motorcycles* (1966), and his follow-up *The Last American Hero* (1967). "We even talked about doing a Part 2 of *Rat Fink & Boo Boo*," muses Bryan, "but we didn't get very far along." Moody died of cancer in 2001 and soon after Bryan decided he'd had enough of the film industry. "I followed the dwindling market of low-budget films through video and porno to its bitter conclusion," he says. "I rode that falling horse until it dropped dead, then I dragged it a little further still until the rotting corpse pulled apart in the road."

Nowadays, Bryan lives in the hills outside L.A., having spent several years building his own house and studio there. He's dubbed it Rozannadon after his wife Rozanna, with a humorous nod to Charles Foster Kane. Says Bryan, "It's a steel kit designed by computer in 10 ft increments and delivered in numbered pieces that require no welding, only the correct placement of self-tapping screws and a variety of nuts and bolts. We built on property that is directly north of the centre of downtown L.A. and at the boundary of the City limits and the Angeles National Forest. The street level is 2,000 ft. above the beach at Venice and about twenty miles away from our old place at the shore."

For me, this has been a fascinating journey. *Don't Go to the Hawks* was once just a name on the list of banned video nasties, and James Bryan an unknown. I now find that I could double the length of this already substantial chapter with ease. Bryan has journeyed through the subterranea of American filmmaking and provided a wonderfully vivid and detailed account of his experiences along the way. Of course, every low-budget director has a story to tell, but few have been so entwined with the industry, and few have such good reason. Life hasn't exactly been easy for Bryan, but he's a man with guts and drive, and an intrinsic intelligence that generates the blend of counter-culture and commerce running through his filmography. He has steeped himself in movie-making for nearly forty years, and seen drastic changes sweep through the industry. For him, the immersion is what it's all about, an immersion that brings the director's emotional life into step with a fantasy world.

His films are not high art, and no one, not him, nor me or anyone else, would say they were. For Bryan, that's not the point anyway: to be making a film is the key, to have that magical synchronisation between real life sweat and endeavour and a dream-world made tangible. "The thing that appealed to me personally," he explains, "without me actually realising it, is emotion. It's a way of dealing with emotions. So making the film or seeing the film, I can be in that emotional world. The strongest element for me is actual production. I go into a state of grace where I know no fear. I have no doubts, and I believe everything is possible. It's that simple. And it doesn't matter what the movie is. I enjoyed turning down those odd offers from Hollywood. I felt free, on top of the world. I didn't need Hollywood. This was before I had even heard of 'burnout'. I don't actually remember when those offers stopped coming, but they're truly a thing of the past. And burnout... what a concept. What a goal! It was all a terrible joke."

1 David Wolper, whose company, Wolper Productions, produced many well-known and widely syndicated TV documentaries included the series *Biography*, *The National Geographic Society Special*, *The Unknown World of Jacques Cousteau*, and *David L. Wolper Presents: Legendary Creatures*, which also enjoyed a successful cinema run in the early '70s. The TV version was known as *Monsters, Myth Or Mystery?* made for the prestigious "Smithsonian Series". One of those interviewed in Wolper's documentary was Bigfoot researcher and director of the horror film *Blood Suckers* Robert W. Morgan, whose obsession with digitons resulted in him directing his own documentary, *In Search of Bigfoot*, aka *Bigfoot: Man Or Beast?* in 1976.

2 Bryan believes that his experience has at least one corollary in the cinema. "I saw *Exuberant* as a new frontier. I recall dream images from the Jung book *Man and His Symbols* that related to Lynch's own images. Which would prove? Maybe Lynch is part of the Family of Man, or that aversion was and is an indirect focus of his art."

3 Bryan is referring here of course to Jr. Timothy Leary.

4 For this particular study into cinema, exactly the sort of precision that filmmakers of the time had to exercise to avoid persecution.

5 A Hollywood talent agent and ex-big band musician.

6 Moody once claimed co-directorship of *Dirtiest Game* - Bryan laughs and says, "No, but - he's welcome. He wants to say that."

on Ducez Coupe Records.

8 About the same time that Larry Hagman was shooting *Beware! The Blob* direct too.

9 Probably *Invasion from Inner Earth*, 1974.

10 Examples include *Mussolini: ultimo atto* by Carlo Lizzani, with Rod Steiger and Franco Nero; and *Doppio delitto* by Steno, with Marcello Mastroianni and Ursula Andress.

11 Dick Robinson won his lawsuit against Sunn Classic in 1982, and started a new production company under the name Ranger Rob.

12 The L.A. production was Frank Roach and Renee Harmon's *Frozen Screams*, about which more in the section on Renee Harmon.

13 Renee Harmon's filmmaking books are: *The Actor's Survival Guide for Today's Film Industry* (1984); *The Complete Book of Success: Your Guide to Becoming a Winner* (1984); *Complete Guide to Low-Budget Film Production* (1984); *How to Audition for Movies and TV* (1992); *The Beginning Filmmaker's Guide to Directing* (1992); *The Beginning Filmmaker's Business Guide: Financial, Legal, Marketing, and Distribution Basics of Making Movies* (1994); *Teaching a Young Actor: How to Train Children of All Ages for Success in Movies, TV and Commercials* (1994); *The Beginning Filmmaker's Guide to a Successful First Film* 1997 co-written with Jim Lawrence.

14 Schweitzer is now Vice President of Castle Hill Productions, who handle upmarket titles like the Liv Ullmann-directed Swedish movie *Private Confessions*, written by Ingmar Bergman.



Bryan at Ranger Rob's editing room, Salt Lake City, Utah, circa 1982, while working for Schick-Sunn Classics.



The Frozen Scream Is a Clean Machine

An Interview with Renee Harmon

Interviews by Cheryl Harmon and Jennifer

James Bryan & Art Pat

Frozen Scream (1981)

The lower temperature is the key—the chill factor

Dr. Tom (Craig Wolf) is working late at his surgery when a mysterious telephone caller warns him to expect a visit from "the angels." When Tom answers a knock at the door, two cowled figures overpower him and inject him with something nasty. His wife Ann (Lynne Kocof) sees the escaping figures and passes out. Ann regains consciousness in hospital to find sinister Doctor Lil Stanhope (Renee Harmon) informing her that Tom died of a heart attack; she must have hallucinated the attackers. Ann protests, but a lousy nurse is to be overruled. *Dream sequence:* Ann sees Tom turn into a skeleton cowled in black. *Flashback:* The beach, on Halloween night. Doctors and students are gathered around a bonfire. Tom is deep in conversation with Doctor Johnson (Lee James) and a priest, Father O'Brian (Wayne Lieberman). Doctor Johnson is impatient with Tom's existential angst. *Listen Tom, I'm not going to let your little guilt trip spoil this project. I'm not going to guilt. I'm going to hell!* Tom replies. *Cutaway within the flashback:* A cowled figure smashes an axe into a young woman's face. *Return to flashback:* Father O'Brian tells the students that All Saints Eve was once a ceremony of resurrection, and the circle of fire they've built represents the sun. *Love and Immortality:* chant the students, linking hands around the fire. *"Call out beyond the moon,"* Dr. Johnson implores. *"It's all a pagan, isn't it?"* Tom says to Father O'Brian. Cathrin (Sunny Bartholomew) advances towards Ann in slow motion. *Flashback ends:* Back at her house, Ann hallucinates Cathrin—or is it Tom? At Doctor Johnson's laboratory, Doctor Stanhope tells him that their research is against nature. *A vision or remembered dream:* *Immortality:* "We're somewhere inside Doctor Stanhope's mind—she is lit against total darkness, a candle by her side. She cuts her wrists, blood flows, and she gnaws at the wound, smearing her face with blood." *Immortality:* Doctor Johnson assures her they are close

to achieving their goal. *Vision/dream memory ends:* "Ann, I'm home—help me, I'm so cold." Tom says, making a phone call from beyond the grave—or the refrigerator. A cowled figure attacks Ann and tells her to keep her suspicions to herself or else she'll have to join Tom in his hell, which is "very cold." Ann finds three more "gasts," including Tom, standing motionless in her walk-in fridge. Tom wakes up and grabs her. Ann screams and runs away. The frozen humanoids give chase. Private detective Kevin McGuire (Thomas Cowen)—don't ask—overpowers one of them by gouging its eyes until blood squirts from its neck. Ann hides in a white building (the hospital?) pursued by Kirk. The nightwatchman finds her, but he is killed by a shard of glass to the eye. Dr. Stanhope rescues Ann, and tells her, *"Immortals live in the core of the clouds. But you are burning."*

Ann (Lynne Kocof) finds her su-
husband stored in a box

Frozen S. 43



There's something deeply off-beam about *Frozen Scream*. It has a lurching, spasmodic quality, an arrhythmia induced by the bizarre music and the crashingly intrusive editing. An electric piano, the sort you might use to perform *Send in the Clowns* at a seaside nightspot, adds a queasy amateur feeling; crude tape loops and electronic whirring underscore conversations, along with the occasional dash of slasher-movie synth. (See James Bryan and *Don't Go in the Woods*.) Somehow though, it works. Dull normality never stands a chance: the mood sways unsteadily between occult cliché, sci-fi weirdness and juddering dislocation, with frequent cutaways to dreams or past events constantly fragmenting the action. When people talk about films being indigestible it's rarely as appropriate as here – the mind feels like it's trying to swallow something that it can't get down (believe me, mixed metaphors are wholly appropriate). The prologue appears to have been designed purely to get the film off to a violent start, and involves a couple swimming in a private pool who barely have time to clock in as 'lovers' before they're murdered. Two black-cloaked killers grimace comically as they strangle and slice their victims – is the film going to be a cheesy send-up?

No, not a send-up; nothing so easily definable. Full of arty istic flourishes that place it somewhere beyond the films of Doris Wishman, *Frozen Scream* achieves a rather deranged quality. I wish there were three more just like it from the same director, I'd happily watch them all tonight.

Given that the theme of the film is the freezing of humans to achieve eternal immortality, at the price of a certain human energy or soul, it's ironic that the acting of even the non-immortals is rife with flat enunciation, 'elsewhere' mannerisms and awkward acting tics. Their jarring performances make even the most mundane exchanges feel drugged, dislodged from reality. In a story full of zombified robotic people, Sunny Bartholomew as 'Cathrin' is perhaps the most memorable. She projects something quite convincingly alienated. "Have you ever noticed how cold Cathrin is? She's like walking ice" someone says. "I love her, she resembles a small-town

beauty queen with a Quasimodo problem, a chippy, factory-damaged glamour-puss obsessed with her own haughtiness."

Cathrin collapses during a rock n'rol dance, after trying to strangle her partner. "Bring some ice", says Doc Stanhope. The late Renee Harmon, who plays Stanhope, would be perfectly at home in Andy Warhol's *Flesh for Frankenstein*, and deserves her own cult following: with her every utterance she embodies the ineffable strangeness of the film. Much of what is extraordinary about *Frozen Scream* emanates from Ms. Harmon, whose uniqueness and mystery resist analysis. She was an actress-producer (a rare enough thing), and according to her she was the true director of this film. I'm not sure what to make of that claim, having failed to trace the credited director Frank Roach, but one thing's for certain: she must have been a formidable ally. If I owned Grauman's Chinese Theater, her handprints would be right there – between Bette Davis and Janis Vader.

In keeping with the frozen fingered theme, even the dialogue fumbles for signification. "Your dreams are full of mental symbols," Dr. Stanhope informs Ann. "I don't want to talk about the mysteries of the mind," she retorts. Elsewhere, Stanhope helpfully draws her own character profile when she observes to Dr. Johnson:

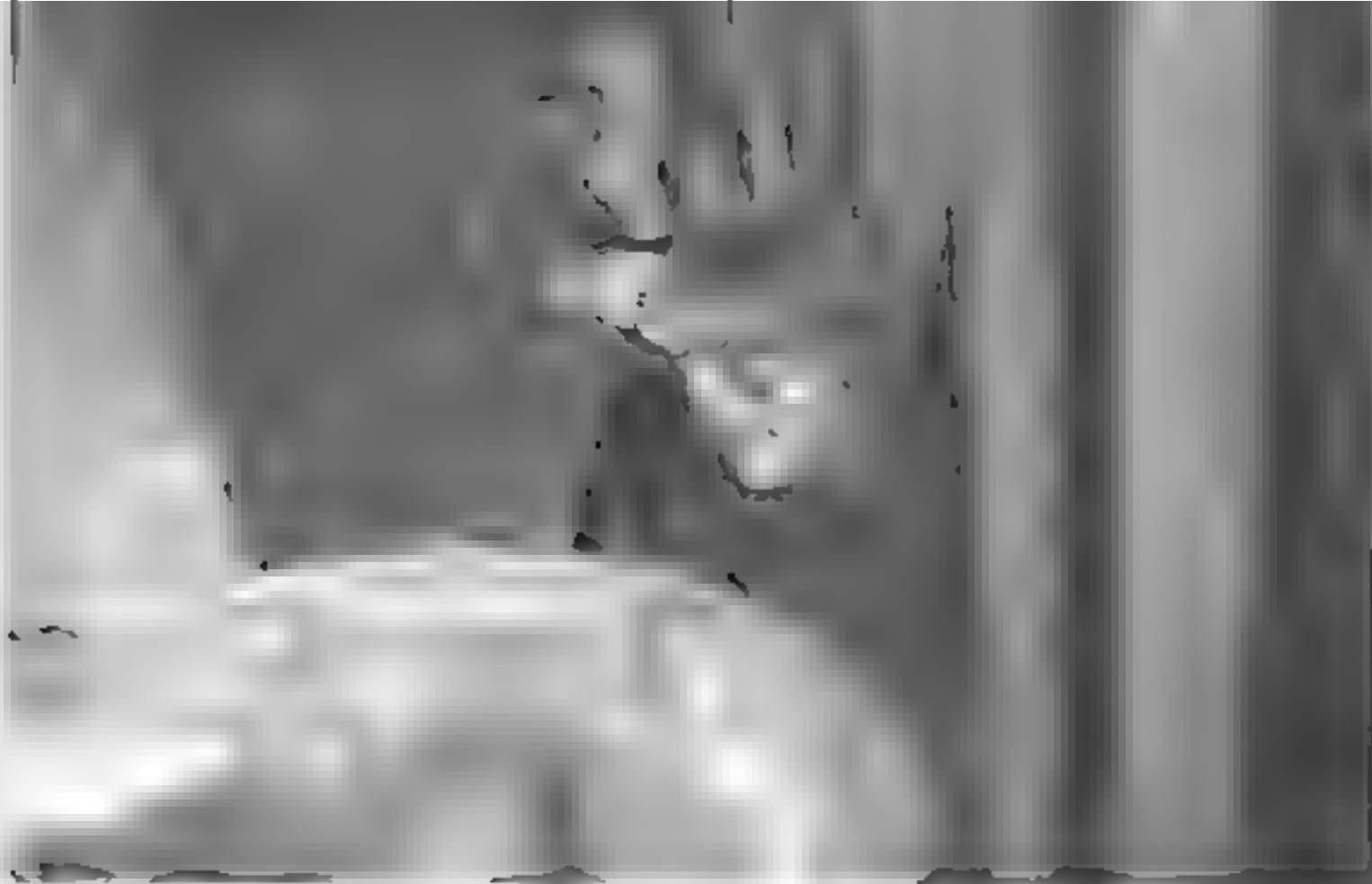
"Sometimes I really don't know what I see in you. Even maybe you appeal in some sense of danger and adventure in me." As for Johnson, I'm still not entirely sure what his process really does. It involves drugs, but there's also a technological angle: the homicidal immortals bear metallic devices in their necks, so there must be radio mind-control going on. Dr. Stanhope suggests that the immortals are murdering people because Johnson has broken down their taboos by force, so no wonder they now kill independently. To make matters even harder to fathom, Ann really does seem to be hallucinating, even though we know Dr. Stanhope was lying when she made her diagnosis. This, added to the intermittent dream imagery, makes the film's perceptual centre difficult to ascertain. While none of the mind-control, chemical, cryogenic, or techno elements really come together into a coherent whole, the proliferation of these sci-fi-horror cyphers gives the film a gleefully garbled quality which aids its passage from the mundane to the insane (It's like Ted V. Mikels's *The Astral Zombies* made by a true creative lunatic.) The film also feels out of time: the sci-fi trappings are imported from the fifties and sixties, but the slasher murder elements and stylistic distortions are defiantly seventies.

The dialogue is as haphazardly post-synched as any Italian gorefest, so if you care too much for realism you'll never be able to enjoy it. However, bad dubbing ceases to be a problem if you just give up and go with it. Try looking at people's eyes instead of their lips. Once you've adjusted you may even find that dubbing adds something to the experience. And at least everyone is speaking English onscreen. Heavily accented English, but English all the same.

Frozen Scream is so violently disorganised that the actual screen violence is secondary. Mind you, if that sounds like baloney to you, rest assured there's still enough bloodshed to soothe a gore-junkie's fevered brow. For reasons that remain narratively and symbolically obscure, Dr. Stanhope chooses to inject the interfering detective McGuire in the eyeball at the end of the film, but which seems a little unnecessary, if the aim is to turn him into an immortal ice zombie, it does at least mean that the film

Dr. Stanhope (Renee Harmon) explains
- in 1968 when they say





Frozen Scream

1988, 16mm, 40-
 William Luce and Platt
 with Luce providing
 the effect in situ

The shadowy figure of Frozen Scream is credited director Frank R. [unclear] in a production photograph taken on location for Nomad Riders. His [unclear] was made without the involvement of Renee Harmon in 1988, the same year as Frozen Scream. [unclear] release of Nomad Riders.

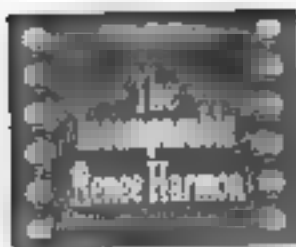
ular drama to its list of achievements. Gore
 ver is not where the action is, if you measure this
 by the usual standards, it won't give up its pleasures
 competence makes for such boring films—and
 n Scream is never ever boring. This fascinating piece
 of mind madness will have historians of future civiliza-
 tions flummoxed as they try to understand the
 that made it. The line between haste and style has
 blurred, leading to a general disconnectedness. There
 are well-conceived moments, in which the director
 as clearly thought about how to make a scene unsettling
 and to be swallowed up by the inadvertent
 surroundings. What finally emerges is a film
 of ambition mixed with technical primitivism: it
 is a line between intention and accident, with
 a creepy synchronicity between them and realization
 of you wonder whether Frank Roach and Renee
 knew exactly what they were or if they did along

shing the provenance of this extraordinary piece
 proven a fraught endeavour. Art Platt, the
 producer, says it was shot on 16mm in no more
 than a few days for approximately \$35,000.
 As to Platt, Frank Roach was actually co-director
 on the set, but Renee Harmon edited and thus
 led the film. Roach was apparently not consulted
 during the editing, leading to a fall-out between the two.
 Frozen Scream was made for the European
 market, around 1988 or '89. I think Frozen Scream and
 Riders (Roach's only other film, made without
 Harmon) were made pretty close together. Frank Roach
 is a little distressed not to be there when they were.
 Renee didn't want to spend a lot of money
 and didn't have a lot of money, so she had to edit
 in somewhere, and I think she paid about \$100
 a month through one of her college classes
 for taking a course on how to get into television
 drama, and that's where she found me and the
 scene she put into the movie. Sunny Bartholomew I think
 had to get into the movie, to get a credit. Renee was a
 kind of businessperson! I was making \$25 a day as

art director. Sometimes we would just go to sleep on the set
 and in the morning if you had a job to do they would wake
 you up and you'd do it. It was fun, and exciting and tiring.
 You wore a lot of hats, because it was non-stop. His
 memories of Roach are few, but he does recall that he was
 a fairly "hands-off" director. "The guy who played the
 detective was complaining to me that Frank wasn't giving
 him any direction, and I said, 'Well, how lucky you are.
 You can do anything you want!'"

Regrettably, I have been unable to trace Frank Roach
 and boy have I tried. But at least now, thanks to Art Platt
 who supplied the information, we know what he looks like
 he plays the drunk seen in an alleyway, and is pictured in
 the photograph below. Maybe one day he'll emerge for a
 DVD commentary, but until then here's his pic.





Author's Note. I was deeply saddened when James Bryan contacted me, early in 2007, to say that Renee Harmon had died of heart failure at her home in Visalia, California on 26 November, 2006. I've decided not to change the tense of the following material – Renee never really received her due, so I prefer to publish this, her first published interview, as it was originally written...

Renee Harmon is unique. You can tell this from *Freaky*, *Scream* and *Lady Street Fighter*, and her extraordinary production *The Executioner Part II*. In a light-hearted mood you might call her a character, but you really wouldn't want to patronise her – even when she smiles or laughs in her movies, she can flash a look that would peel a rattlesnake. Her German accent is another testament to her strength: she's lived in California since the late sixties, but when I spoke to her on the telephone recently I heard not a single concession to L.A. cadences – her English is fine, but there's no transatlantic twang, and it's not a no-valuey-speak.

Harmon is not widely celebrated, in fact many who know about her cinema regard it as cheap and shoddy. They see the obvious imitations but miss the real pleasures. Those with a squeamish dislike for rough edges will never appreciate the strange energy and determination of her filmmaking. Harmon has worked on numerous projects with James Bryan, another filmmaker hardly over-blessed with funding. What united them in the seventies and eighties was their resolve – in the teeth of possible failure, in the absence of money or critical

admiration, they strove long and hard to keep on working. If you banish the received wisdom of how films should look and sound, both Bryan and Harmon offer aesthetic sensations outside of the familiar and a climate where culture is currently being rendered into a game of retroactive consensus, we really ought to cherish those who cannot be so easily absorbed.

It's always rather gruesome when critics try to force art motivations onto exploitation films, but there's an interesting overlap between the practices of low-budget commercial cinema and the avant-garde. One of the reasons that films like *Lady Street Fighter* or *Freaky Scream* feel so alien and unique is the haste with which they're shot, with an attitude that says, 'Who cares if the take was stuffed, if there's no more cash it goes in the movie!' The limitation becomes a distinction when you change the artistic context: hastily decision-making becomes spontaneity (a venerable aesthetic idea) and what seems slapdash equates to bloody-mindedness (a trait we love in our crazy artists).

Speaking as someone who's watched a lot of a legendarily bad movies, I know what matters to me: I want to enter another world, to visit somewhere new, and I don't really care how intentional or involuntary it is. Bryan and Harmon produce real surprises, leaving you incredulous out of step with reality. The rulebook has been flung out and it matters not to me if this was part of a creative strategy or a last-minute dash to get the scene in the can. I adore the attitude that says a film *must* be made, whether it transgresses normal standards of quality or not. (*The Executioner Part II* is especially far out in this respect and Harmon, though onscreen too infrequently in my opinion, was a major contributor both onscreen and off.) It's probably only by ignoring the possibility of failure that Renee Harmon was able to complete her projects, so it's not surprising that she has little time for criticism or suggestions of variable quality. Enquiries along such lines are curtly shot down. She's an unswerving individual with no taste for compromise and, if you don't like her work, you know what you can do!

A Chat with Renee Harmon

Renee Harmon was born in Mannheim, Germany, in 1921. Her first ambition and creative passion was to dance. As a child, she was a fan of Shirley Temple, but nothing she saw in movies as a child at least made her dream of the film industry. I asked her if she felt that she had stumbled into film by accident.

Well, in a way, I did. I was a dancer with the Mannheim Ballet. I was in dancing classes since I was four years old, and then when I came to the US I danced for colleges and universities – mostly religious universities and my outfits were very clean, and my dancing was clean. What I don't like in dancing right now is that it is kind of dirty.

Ms. Harmon has an air of authority which stems from her family background. "My father was in the army. And the Army was a wonderful place to live. My father hated Hitler, so he was killed at the end of the War by one of his officers. Because he said, 'Well, well, well. We got rid of Hitler! Let's put up the white flags.' He was shot in the back. An American General helped my mother, and he came to a funeral. My grandmother was Jewish. My parents ran a store, which was completely destroyed during the War. My mother survived and came with us to America.

Harmon married an American serviceman in Germany on 3 August, 1955, and moved to the USA in 1957. (Their first child, a boy, was born on 17 July, 1957 in Augusta, Georgia. Renee's daughter and companion Cheryl was born the same later, on 9 July 1968, on an American Army base in Wiesbaden, Germany.) "We arrived in New York and from there we went to Minnesota. My husband was in the army and he was transferred every so often, and we went all over the United States. I liked the army officers' wives, and I had a good time with them. We ended up in Woodland Hills, Los Angeles in 1969, a very nice suburb, nice people, accepted into the Country Club. It was a nice place." As for California 1969, with all its changing morality: "There were no hippies in the suburbs. The hippies were downtown but we never went downtown.

In the mid-seventies, having settled in California, Harmon took a post at Moorpark College, Los Angeles, as an acting teacher. There she met James Bryan, who was teaching camera skills. During 1976, the two worked together on a project called *Lady Street Fighter*, which was eventually released in 1978 (see previous chapter on James Bryan). In 1980, Renee launched production of *Frozen Scream*, employing her Moorpark College students. "*Frozen Scream* was made in a haunted house. We didn't know it was a haunted house, we were told it was later. The lights would go off and on, and my people were shouting, 'Come on, come on, get the lights back on.' It went all over the United States; not big theatres, small theatres. It was very clean; all my movies are clean.

Harmon's memory is a little vague: she doesn't remember Doug Fiermi or Celeste Hammond, who receive screen credit for writing the film, but she's sure they had input in the script: "I thought if I wrote and directed and produced and starred, it would be too much, so I gave the credits away. Frank Roach was a cameraman but I decided it would be better to have another director on the film. I didn't want to be credited as director, for business reasons, I directed the film.

Harmon failed to track down Frank Roach for his comments, it's hard for me to know how to respond to this

assertion, although it is worth bearing in mind that Renee Harmon is not in the best of health. She is far clearer when quizzed about her own directorial style. "I find it easy to direct others. Because when I look at people I sit in the back of the room and write things down, and then my director talks to them. I am not a very nice person when I am filming, okay? Very mean, yes! And demanding! Bearing in mind James Bryan's account of the making of *The Executioner Part II*, which she starred in and produced (see chapter on Bryan), I asked Ms. Harmon if she ever had to compromise when making her films on such very low budgets. "No, no, no. No one could interfere with me. The script was filmed as I wrote it. I had no interference." She is also very adamant that I stress one vitally important thing about her work: "All my films are clean. I don't have anything dirty in my films.

Ms. Harmon exited the film industry in the mid-eighties and took up writing, so was the industry changing? "Yes. It was not as clean as I wished it to be." Since then she has published a book of mystery stories called *The Three Red Satinels* some time around the late 1980s. A book adaptation of *Frozen Scream* exists, penned by Ms. Harmon herself, called *Eva Covenant* (a must for any fan of the film, if you can find it), and she has also written a book called *Hollywood Mysteries: The Hunting Party – Let the Dice Roll* (published 2000), about a female detective. Although she is incapacitated somewhat these days, she is animated and emphatic in conversation, she

Renee Harmon at the age





Reenie in Frozen Scream

Reenie in Frozen Scream



Reenie for Tim
Saban Returns 1992. (or is
he seen at the

can still write, and is working on new projects. I wish
was as rich as her Califorma neighbour George Lucas. I'd
give her a blank cheque and a loud-hailer and set her
up with a Hollywood crew!

*James Bryan wrote the following passage after I spoke to
him about my conversation with Renee Harmon. He paints
a different picture to the one that emerges above. This is a
most important additional commentary. Ms. Harmon was
in no way feeble when we spoke, and she directed our
conversation adroitly, but she was quite ill, and
obviously confused at times, especially when it came to
names, dates, and the professional status of her one-time
collaborators in film. Jim's recollections are of Renee in
her prime, and provide an essential balance for our
perception of her character.*

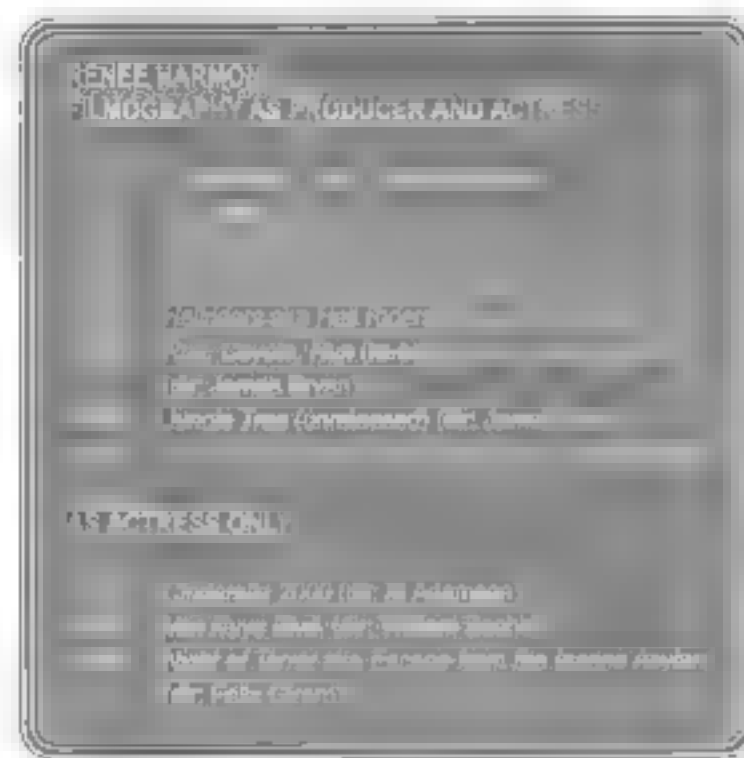
As producer Renee kept a very effective tight control over
her productions, planning and arranging for locations and
cast. During actual production she was fully involved with
her part as actress and with other cast members, who were
usually her students. Renee spent a lot of time working with
the cast, going over and over their performances in the days
prior to actual production, so in that sense she was
directing, and had shaped the actors and their work down to
the smallest degree. When we were in production and on the
set Renee never stopped as producer and worked behind the
scenes to keep things on track, yet she didn't have much to
say about the director's job other than to support his
authority and to demand the same support from everyone
else. When others came to her with questions outside the
work done previously in her directing sessions, she would
direct these people to consult with the director for the
answers to their questions. Renee never was one to usurp
the director's authority and never allowed anyone on the set
to do it either. She was always working to support me and I
worked to support her. I believe Renee would have worked
the same way with any of her directors. She expected

everybody to do their job and she backed everyone in
production wholeheartedly. Renee used a lot of first-time
people so there were always unprofessional types who had
to learn the ropes, and they might start out finding fault with
me or Renee; ultimately, due to Renee's ironclad demands
on the set, those who began with ridicule would develop a
respect and genuine affection for her. Perhaps now, with
Renee in a weakened physical state, those old comments
that used to bounce off a very tough hide have started to
stick, or maybe the way the world sees our old efforts now
seem less than kind to her. If Renee feels the need to
reconsider the credits on her body of work then I'll go
with whatever she sees as correct in the light of a career to
be proud of. The Renee I've known over the years gave
everyone their credit and was generous in her praise. In my
hearing she never once detracted from any of her directors'
contributions, nor brought their credits into question.

How about this
Renee Harmon and Bill

Bryan's video copy of

Ran, Coyote, Ran, the unreleased 1985
Lady Street Fighter!



The Fiend from Prime-Time

John Peyser on *The Centerfold Girls*

The Centerfold Girls (1974)

Perhaps the strangest of the seventies proto-slasher films, *The Centerfold Girls* – in which pretty girls who pose for the same softcore calendar are stalked and killed by a puritanical misogynist – certainly rings some changes on the old three-act structure. It's divided into sections, as distinct from each other as the pages of a calendar. Nothing links the three settings except the maniac, who turns up like a bad penny to eradicate the objects of his desire. It's this mechanical, eerily cautious structure that distinguishes the film, as it mirrors both the subject of the film (the commercial objectification of women) and the attitude of the killer. The effect is almost to mimic the portmanteau or anthology film, popular at the time thanks to the British company Atticus.

The credits rise over the killer, Andrew Price, on a moonlit beach, burying a female corpse in a sandy grave. The only sound is the indifferent roar of the waves. Lacking any context or explanation, this opening gambit immediately unnerves us with its lack of emotion. There's no mystery, no suspense, just the flat, unadorned concealment of a corpse to 'get things rolling'. This objectified, afflictless vibe recurs throughout and gives the film a special kick that makes it feel like a precursor of William Lustig's *Murder, My Sweet*. And like *Murder, My Sweet*, *The Centerfold Girls* rests firmly on a terrific performance by its star. Andrew Price is creepy and convincing in this, the second of his lunatic roles that year, after *The Barn of the Naked Dead* (see review section). It's a part that was probably less than substantial on the page, but Price just picks it up and runs with it. He's one of best low-budget stars of the era. I was reminded a little of Anthony Perkins's insane priest in Ken Russell's *Crimes of Passion*, though for my money Price is scarier. He addresses his victims with a barely suppressed sneer, a superior air of disgust borne of a bitter Puritanism. Price ought to be a genre celebrity along the same lines as Perkins, or Donald Pleasence. Like the former, he has a gaunt, sardonic intensity, and like the latter, he can turn schlock into gold. With decent material, like *The Centerfold Girls*, he's unstoppable. Peyser directs with hallucinatory camera angles to amplify the killer's actions, emphasising

his dangerous sense of omnipotence. Utterly convinced of his capabilities, he exudes a cold, shark-eyed simulation of post-sixties freedom, both comical and carnivorous. We see him stepping from a car to his too-short trousers and out-of-date spats, the camera's floor-level wide-angle lens conferring a sort of geekish anti-glamour. He's an unhinged psycho in the 'permissive age', out of date but able to pass himself off as just another garish Me-Generation freak. (Bill Landis makes the following sharp observation in his book *Steazoid Express*: "Andrew Price plays a psychopath who stalks the monthly pinups that appear in a third-string men's stroke magazine. Curiously, Price himself was a man of the month in *Viva* magazine at the time, so he brings an extra dimension of reality, zest, and understanding to the role.")

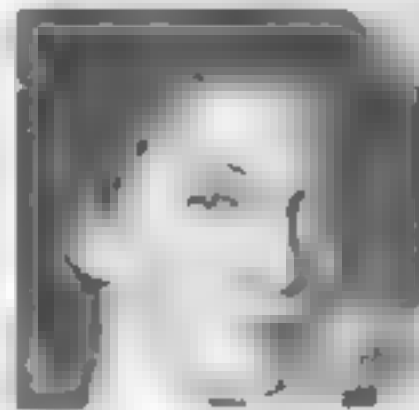
Unusually for a low-budget movie of this (supposedly debased) sort, art design decisions have clearly been made with the killer's apartment decked out entirely in white: white bed, white wardrobe, white walls, various white accessories, and even a white record deck on which the killer plays an album. (If only it was white vinyl!) In contrast, the black, misogynous fantasies of the killer are immediately apparent: we see him slicing up a girly calendar, enacting hypocritical violence on the primary symbolic currency allowed to women in patriarchal culture – the photographic image of beauty.

A groovy sixties horn arrangement introduces Jackie Carol (Jaime Lyn Bauer). The music, along with her casual nudity, suggests the counterculture, until we see her arrive at a hospital – her place of work. In nurse's uniform, she immediately embodies a social role that has no truck with 'dropping out'. Kind-hearted Jackie then buys herself a night in hell by taking pity on a hippyish hitch hiker called Linda (Janet Wood), who has apparently been abandoned by her friends. Jackie invites her to spend the night. Only when the girl's friends (Dennis Oliveri, Teda Bracci and Tabu Cochrane) invade the house does she realise she's dealing with a spiteful little psycho who'd have been more at home at the Spahn Ranch. (The name 'Linda' was perhaps intended by screenplay writers Arthur Marks and Robert Peete to echo Linda Kasabian, the Manson girl who turned State snitch.) Certainly, these aggressive, home-invading hippies seem freshly plucked from the post-Cielo Drive American psycho

Jaime Lyn Bauer as
nurse and heroine
Jackie Carol in *The Centerfold Girls*

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL
GIRLS IN THE WORLD!

Miss JANUARY



Will he LOVE me
or KILL me?

the
Centerfold
Girls

Sharon Tate and her friends were arbitrarily killed by such people, even though they weren't the originally intended target, the Manson Family struck with an indiscriminate resentment, something that gave the killings their special horror. Likewise, the first part of *The Centerfold Girls* deals with the fear of being exploited, robbed, bullied and terrorized, just because you happen to fit an arbitrary mugshot of the *bourgeoisie* carried around in a sociopath's head.

After a night of humiliation, Jackie escapes to a nearby residence, only to fall foul of Ed Walker (Aldo Ray), the frustrated husband of a shrewish wife (Paula Shaw). Instead of trying to help, he treats the distraught woman's partial nudity as an invitation to party. So much has gone wrong for this suffering heroine (the plot's quite Sadean in its mercilessness) that we can only wince when she escapes this new indignity and then wanders into the arms of the killer.

Page Two* sets off in a much higher vein. Three pretty centrefold models, Sand (Kitty Carl), Glen (Ruth Ross) and Charly (Jennifer Ashrey), a young male actor Sam (John Denos), an ageing modelling agent, Melissa (Francine York), and her photographer husband Perry (Roy Danton) the latter pair enmeshed in a sort of Auber-*le* relationship head off for a photoshoot of a chic bachelor pad on an attractive but deserted island. From the trendy guitar music and shadowy colour-tinged lighting to the *Ten Little Indians* vibe and the black-clad killer wielding an open razor, this middle segment plays for all the world like a Continental *giallo* of the sort Sergio Martino or Silvio Amadio might have directed. If the sound recording had been blatantly post-synched, the illusion would be complete. And Peyser's taste for swift, artistically imaginative shots of blood splashing from victims' throats (across a plate glass window, into a deep-blue outdoor pool) is worthy of Dario Argento circa 1971. Perhaps because of the stylisation, the mood is much lighter: the body-count is cheerfully high and the whole island escapade is almost a holiday from the grimness that surrounds it.

The third part involves Vera (Tiffany Bolling), a pretty airline hostess, and her friend Patsy (Connie Strickland). Patsy hosts a fabulous shindig that's shot hand-held through

a wide-angle lens (like all the best parties). Her friend however takes a raincheck, wondering about the creep who mailed her yellow roses and then followed them up with a phone call saying, "Beautiful, aren't they? I hope they burn you in yellow." It's the high life alright, but there's a shadow in the feast. Occasional glimpses of the roiling ocean cue a dark foreboding, borne in by the roaring waves. By now we've come to recognise the killer's soundtrack theme - a haunting, slightly precious mock-harpichord tune - it's like something The Doors might have recorded around the time of *Strange Days*. In fact, as Prime murders Patsy (mistaking her for Vera) he looks uncannily like Ray Manzarek (crossed perhaps with Tom Verlaine). Alerted to the fact that there's a killer working his way through the calendar, Vera ducks out of town, but stupidly leaves her forwarding address with an equally careless friend.

Then we're back on the bad-luck trail, as Vera's car suffers a flat. The sailors (Scott Edmund Lane and Richard Mansfield) who pick her up slip a roofer into her beer, and by nightfall poor Vera is flyin' high. The boys pull in at a motel for a night of drugged debauchery - a scene that recalls Welles's *Touch of Evil*. When Vera emerges from her night of ravishment, Prime is there to greet her - posing as a concerned square called 'Clement Duane' who though he heard a commotion from the room next door. When he offers the shell-shocked girl a lift back to town, she's so disorientated by her experience that she mistakes this horn-rimmed Humphrey for a saviour. That is, until she finds a copy of her magazine centrefold in the back seat, with creepy graffiti scrawled over it.

This time, though, the relationship between killer and victim is different. Vera fights back and challenges the killer verbally. "There are lots of pretty girls in the world you know, you can't kill the whole world." Again, Peyser displays an aesthete's eye as Vera makes a run for it through a fire-scorched forest, with trees reduced to brittle stumps and the ground thick with ash. And, in a scene that plays like a prototype of the 'Final Girl' scenes so beloved of critics, Vera makes a stand against her tormentor.

Like many of the best American horrors of the 1970s, *The Centerfold Girls* is a triumph of atmosphere over story. The choice of locations, the sparing sound design and the subtle rootlessness of the narrative unpick the viewer's genre moorings, leaving the overall sensation weirdly loose and defocused. For all the second section's frivolity, the film has little warmth - one feels that arbitrary narrative decisions are being made to steer the courses of characters towards disaster: a chilling analogue to the empty impulsiveness of serial murder. Several bleak and impressive scenes occur at coastal locations, adding to the morbid, end-of-the-line feel. It's not a complete downer but it would be, if it wasn't for Prime's compelling performance. Besides, 'down' is good as far as I'm concerned: a far grislier movie like *Blind/Waiting* pines on the atrocity while attending to our prurience with all the smart of a posh waiter. I prefer movies that bite rather than tick the horror-fan's hand, and I want my serial killer films to convey the sickness of the killer. *The Centerfold Girls* was directed by a television specialist known mainly for mainstream drama entertainment. Yet he turns in this chilling piece of work that proves you don't have to love the horror genre to make a great genre film. I wish Peyser had returned to horror a few more times, because *The Centerfold Girls* is a genuinely creepy and engaging drive-in classic deserving of much greater eminence in fan circles.

John Feyer
Interviewed

John Peyser was born at 86th Street and Broadway in New York City. 10 August 1916, and raised in Woodmere Long Island. "My father was an insurance man but also a frustrated Broadway producer," he recalls. "He produced two plays on Broadway, neither great successes, but our house was always filled with actors, actresses, writers, directors and assorted theatre people. From the time I was in high school I knew that I would be in 'The Business.' I started in radio and then on to television and into the cinema and back to television and then back to cinema etc. After high school I attended Co-gate University for four years. While I was here I worked in a small radio station in Utica, New York, as assistant program manager. My first job after school was directing fifteen-minute and thirty-minute open-end dramatic shows to be sold to small radio stations. After I had made a hundred of them I went on the road to sell them to stations all over the New England States. Then I got the opportunity to become a page at NBC. After I had been there six months, besides paging and taking guided tours of the studios and acting as floor director on soap operas, I was afforded the chance to join the new television department. I was transferred to the R & A Exhibit at the 1939-40 World Fair in New York and put on live shows for the exhibit for two years. I continued to work for NBC until the war came and I went overseas to North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and Luxembourg to try to grab radio stations before the Germans blew them up, get them back on the air and another team relieved me, and I would move on to the next job."

The Fiend from Prime-Time



amazement. Peyser recalled afterward that "from then on, during rehearsals, Mr. Hampden could not start to sit down unless Jimmy was there placing a chair for him."¹

In 1955, Peyser moved to California, maintaining an astonishing work-rate as a contract director for Warner and Universal. "I directed over a thousand filmed TV shows including *The Untouchables*, *Combat*, *Came's Hundred*, *Switch*, *Charlie's Angels* and on and on," he said. Peyser left the United States in 1966 and headed for Spain, directing the war series *The Red Patrol* which used Spanish locations for depictions of desert warfare. "Then I stayed on and did a bunch of pictures, including *Honeyman with a Stranger* with Janet Leigh, *Four Rode Out* with Sue Lyon, Leslie Nielsen and Perné Roberts, and *Kashanra Run* with Perné Roberts, Juan Mateos and Alexandra Bastedo."

This image shows a blank, aged, cream-colored page, likely an endpaper or flyleaf of a book. The paper has a slightly textured appearance with some minor creases and discoloration, characteristic of old paper. The left edge of the page shows the binding of the book, and the overall tone is a warm, off-white or light beige.

opposite page strip of images from the
victim No 1 we never ever

Jackie Carter's night of horror

This is one killer who can't be trusted with the season.

Line 50-55-73

Bring in wide-angle owing the film the benefit

J. P. Lynch

2005/05/16 14:00

$\hat{m}_1, \hat{m}_2, \dots, \hat{m}_n$

புறநாடு

Prüfungstermin: Sommer

John T. Kelly, Editor

Boiling and Prater in the film's last scene.

100



The Centerfold Girls was a production of General Film Corp., a company owned and run by Marks. Peyser explained, "The money was put up by a small group of private investors who had been into three films prior to *The Centerfold Girls*. The film cost \$181,000 complete, and was shot in twenty-one days on 16mm stock. It returned its money to the investors with a small profit." As part of the pre-shoot research for the project, questionnaires were sent out to exhibitors on the East Coast, mostly drive-in operators, along with a synopsis of the story. According to Marks, the questionnaires asked theatre owners how interested they were in booking stories featuring horror and nudity. "They responded enthusiastically," Peyser added, "so we made the picture."

The film was shot in December 1973 in Los Angeles with the numerous shore scenes filmed in Paradise Cove, about twenty-five miles north of the city. Peyser had nothing but praise for his star, Andrew Price: "Andy was a doll to work with. We had done TV shows before so we were not strangers going into this film. His input was very important. As we had a very tight shooting schedule, we worked out his character, his dress and even the idea of his all-white living quarters before we started to shoot." Of the rest of the cast he recalled: "The actresses were hungry thespians. They understood the nudity problems and by the end of the first day of each segment lack of clothing was another costume. I worked with each girl every morning during make-up. Some had a lot of working experience but most were tyros. I did the best with what I had in the time available. One thing I would have changed was to play down the hippies. I think I let them get out of hand. Unfortunately there was hardly time for 'take two.' We were doing about forty to fifty set-ups a day. I rehearsed with the actors during lighting. I worked with the people whenever I had a chance before shooting began."

I asked Peyser for his recollections about other key members of the production: "Mark Wofin, who did the soundtrack, had access to an extensive music library. Most of the music was 'library', already recorded. We selected the cues and themes from that library. Wofin did record some cues. Wheeze was a musical group we hired to record cues we could not find in the library. Charles Stroud, the producer, had been a child actor. He later became a production manager and worked in many films. He was promoted to producer by Art Marks. He did the film *Together* (dir. Arthur Marks, 1970). Filmed in Greece. He later produced a number of films for General Films and Arthur Productions. Robert Maxwell was a well-known independent director of photography. He was suggested to us by Roger Corman. His knowledge of low-key lighting and mood atmosphere was a must for the look of this film. Robert Peete, an Afro-American writer, collaborated with Art Marks after Marks had written the story. Peete wrote the screenplay and then he and Marks polished it."

When I asked Peyser if contemporary factors like the Manson case had played a part in the darkness of the story, he was adamant that such connections were superfluous. "Not the Manson case. Just the temper of the times. I think it was an era of how much we could get away with. We had been censored by television and the Hayes office for so long that the new freedom was a great relief, but still we were held within bounds by an innate sense of good taste and built-in self-censorship. For instance, I think movie fucking is a bore." He was equally dismissive about possible influences from recent American shockers like *The Last*

House on the Left: "I was not aware of any other film in this genre. I had been away in Spain for eight years and nothing of that kind ever was shown in the time of Franco. What you saw was what I wanted you to see. I must say it was all."

The Centerfold Girls was released in the late Spring of '74 when the drive-ins re-opened after the winter snow. It opened in six Eastern states: Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Peyser recalled that, "The reviews and press were always favourable and enthusiastic. The picture was financially successful and went on to play drive-ins all over the U.S.A."

After *Centerfold Girls*, Peyser went back to television always his greatest pleasure. He contributed episodes to *Hawaii Five-O*, *Tales of the Unexpected*, *Quincy*, *CHiPs*, and *Charlie's Angels*, among many others. However, sources often give the wrong impression when it comes to credits of long-running television shows, frequently implying a director has worked throughout a series, when in fact he may only have directed a single episode: such is the case with Peyser's contribution to *Charlie's Angels* for which he directed "Taxi Angels" in 1981. To call him "best-known" for his work on the series, as some obituaries did, is somewhat leading.

(Other directors were far more intimately involved with the *Charlie's Angels* series: Dennis Donnelly who made *The Toolbox Murders*, Bob Kelljan, director of *Rape Squad* for AIP, and George McCowan, director of the wonderful *Fringes*, all made numerous episodes each. Putting aside the live dramas of the forties and fifties, for which complete credits are unavailable, Peyser's most sustained involvement appears to have been on shows like *Behind Closed Doors* (a late-fifties spy series for which he made sixteen episodes), *The Untouchables* (the classic crime series for which he made nine episodes), *Combat* (a W.W.II war drama series of the sixties, for which he made twenty-seven episodes), and the series which he himself created for television, *The Rat Patrol* (a drama series set in W.W.I. for which he shot ten episodes, three of which were edited together to make the TV movie *The Last Harbor Run*).

With a career so deeply embedded in the heyday of American television, and a list of directing credits still to be definitively compiled, which Peyser himself claimed would reach over a thousand, it's perhaps a little strange that this piece – to my knowledge the most detailed ever written about him – should focus mainly on *The Centerfold Girls*, a film so untypical of his work, his 'black sheep' even. I found him courteous on the subject, but disinclined to discuss the film in detail. I suppose it's understandable in a career that saw him directing the greats of the Hollywood screen, rubbing shoulders with Sinatra and Dean, and then ploughing through a phenomenal run of hit television shows it's a little wonder that for him, *The Centerfold Girls* was of minor interest. For the rest of us, who love and admire the film, it's amazing to think of a life so packed with achievement that this movie barely mattered to its maker! Rest in peace, John Peyser. If ever a man deserved a lie-down, it's you!

¹ <http://www.hugoboss.com/pages/blacky.column69.html>

² Despite several erroneous credits elsewhere, John Peyser had nothing to do with the 1969 film *Anatomy of a Crime*.

ALL MOVIE

AT LAST...
TOTAL
TERROR!

ALIEN

CASTING BY GARY SWARTZ, FREDERICK P. FORD
COSTUME DESIGNER LINDA LEE AGUIAR • HAIR DOUGLAS F. SMITH
MAKEUP GEORGE NEWMAN SMAY • JOHN WILLIAMS
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS R. L. BROWN AND GARY FREDERICK P. FORD
PRODUCED BY GARY SWARTZ AND GARY FREDERICK P. FORD
DIRECTED BY GARY FREDERICK P. FORD

R RESTRICTED
Under 17 requires
accompanying parent or
adult guardian

Carolina on My Mind

The Films of Frederick Friedel

Axe (1974)

Although genre movies from the Southern states are often perceived as simple fare aimed at those for whom 'Art' is simply the name of the guy who runs the drugstore, there are a significant few whose work makes the catches inoperable. Lone Star horror specialist S.F. Brownrigg is one of the foremost examples, and another is Frederick Friedel. Although Friedel – a Brooklynite who moved to Charlotte, North Carolina seeking film work – directed only two horror films in the 1970s, they are head and shoulders above the pack.

Best known around the world as *Axe*, Friedel's debut initially sounds unlikely to inspire adjectives such as subtle, experimental or thoughtful – so, to set off on the right foot, let's begin by remembering that the director's original title for the film was *Lisa, Lisa*. The repetition of this gentle, childlike name sets the scene in quite a different way. It has a romantic and poetic cadence, placing a (doubled/split) female identity centre stage, and suggests yearning, sadness or regret (feelings often expressed through the repetition of a name). When we eventually meet Lisa we begin to appreciate both the tenderness of the original title and the irony; once we've seen her in action, the echoing title is more like a siren cry reaching for a lost soul. It's also a reiteration of a first name without a surname – and unanswered questions about the role of a patriarchal character become increasingly significant as the film progresses.

The credits appear over a beautifully photographed view of a farmhouse at dusk (or dawn), with a tree beside it silhouetted against the sky, branches and twigs reaching out like delicate nerve fibres. Friedel holds the shot for a long time (due, in fact, to problems making the film run to feature length), but like most of the film's slower passages it dovetails beautifully with the emotional bias of the story. Austin McKinney, Friedel's invaluable director of photography, achieves many striking images throughout the film, but this painterly opening shot is especially fine, and feels more like something from Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) than neighbouring fare like *Doctor Gore* (directed the same year by *Lisa*'s

producer J.G. Patterson). Although the early scenes veer away for a while, the mood of this first image, redolent of childhood and memory and the vulnerability of the mind, ultimately prevails.

Post-credits, it's a very masculine world in which we find ourselves, as we join three men breaking into a hotel room. This dysfunctional trio – Steele (Jack Canon), a temperamental sardonic hood with a down-at-heel aura, Lomax (Ray Green), a bullish heavy, and Billy (Frederick Friedel himself), a nervous, lanky youngster – provides the first axis of the film. We stay with them as they settle down to wait for their prey, a man called Aubrey (Frank Jones). But what could have been eclipsed into a brief expository scene becomes a weirdly attenuated cinematic set-piece in its own right, running approximately four-and-a-half minutes. Nervous glances to the right under the hotel room door; fragments of detail as the three attempt to keep their cool; hallucinatory suspensions of time in the editing – all turn an otherwise 'dead air' scene into a sequence that cues the film's overall mood. By the time the unfortunate Aubrey arrives, our sense of time has changed, sucking us into the drama on Friedel's terms. And it's no caprice – what may seem merely perverse to begin with is a tip-off to the real metabolism of the movie.

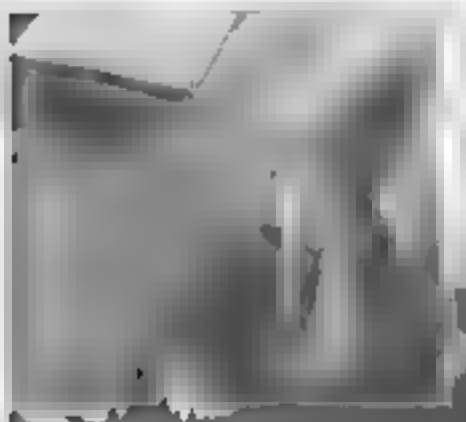
The confrontation with Aubrey ends in his violent death. The gang of three go on the run, squabbling among themselves and revealing the dynamic of their group. The 'strongest' character is also the most compromised. Steele's role as leader is undercut by his bitterness and fake machismo; beneath the posturing we sense a man perpetually disappointed in himself. For all his bravado he's barely suited to guiding his own destiny, never mind that of his partners. Steele attempts to assert his leadership during a bullying interlude at a convenience store. Showing off to the brutish Lomax, he subjects a lone female shop assistant (Carol Miller) to a barrage of humiliation. The scene is disturbingly well-acted – Miller admirably conveys suppressed terror, making the degradation of this character (which in graphic terms amounts to little more than the removal of her blouse) acutely uncomfortable. The impact is conveyed through

approximate page 100
 A more age of steel 100
 A more age of steel 100
 Aubrey Frank Jones 100
 Terrified storekeeper Carol Miller 100
 Lisa Leslie 100
 and director Frederick Friedel 100
 Austin McKinney 100
 pictorial elegance 100
 expectable 100





here as played by Jack Canon, the somnolent North Carolina actor whose sloth helped bring Friedel's best-known films to life



the acting and direction, both of which refuse to deliver on illicit 'exploitation' thrill that isn't also balanced by a counter-weight of horror. Significantly Billy played by the director, remains outside in the car during the assault and he refuses the bag of nuts Steele offers him when he and Lomax return. In a perhaps slightly disingenuous way, Friedel is establishing his own relationship to the violence depicted.

After this gruesome episode, we encounter the second axis of the film: the relationship between strange and stunted young Lisa (Leslie Lee) and her paralysed, mute but perpetually aware grandfather (Douglas Powers). The two of them occupy an isolated farmhouse, standing in its own grounds like a parish, off the road and away from other habitation. It's the house seen in the credit sequence. Fraught with an air of anxiety, the building itself seems to vibrate with impending trauma.

Lisa calls the man for whom she cares 'grandfather' but he's not very old, in his fifties maybe, and our doubts about the truth of their relationship are stimulated by suggestive editing. It's difficult to be sure quite what feeling is trapped behind the staring eyes of this man as he witnesses the encroachment of Steele's gang into the house, and later Lisa's bloody retaliation. No easy emotional cues are given. He cannot show love or hate, anger or fear. Somehow, though, it seems likely that he's seen Lisa's darker side before. Douglas Powers, who has the unenviable task of conveying emotion without moving his face, is marvelous at achieving what's needed. His eyes alone carry numerous scenes to which the camera homes in on his features. With so much mystery, so little explanation, the audience must scour his slightest change of expression for clues as to what has happened before. Through the editing, Friedel suggests all manner of possible explanations, none of them pleasant. When Lisa steps out into the back yard to kill a chicken, the edit takes us from a shot of her chopping the bird's head off with an axe to a close-up of her grandfather's intensely staring eyes. It's not a reaction shot - he's indoors and can't see outside - but the editing links the two and carries intimations of castration, further elaborated when Lisa returns and feeds the old man raw eggs from a bowl. Perhaps grandfather was once a source of unwanted intimacy? After the house is invaded by the gang, a distressed Lisa shuts herself in the bathroom and sees a large worm in the bathtub plughole. Following on from the 'violation' of her house by male intruders, Lisa's hallucination has inevitable symbolic weight.

While it's perfectly normal for a country girl to kill a chicken for dinner, Lisa's demeanour as she's doing it is unsettlingly detached, and the scene where she lingers over a smashed egg when returning from the henhouse a brief touch, but genuinely haunting - raises all sorts of questions, not least the whereabouts of her mother. It's also a clear nod to Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (remember Catherine Deneuve's dreamy, disconnected Carole, gazing at a crack in the pavement? *Repulsion* also comes to mind during Lomax's attempted rape of Lisa, which Friedel stages in tight close-ups with a stifling quietness from the actors. And finally, the stubborn lack of dialogue explaining the past is as pervasive a directorial choice here as Polanski's refusal to spell out the source of Carole's childhood trauma.

Whatever our suspicions, they remain unanswered and we have to move on. The old man's immobility

means that, disturbed or not, Lisa must act alone against the invaders. And act she certainly does. When Lomax tries to rape her, she slices him across the back of his neck, presumably opening arteries too. Although we don't see it) using a cut-throat razor she was playing with earlier. Dragging Lomax's body into the bathroom, she dumps it in the tub and hacks it to bits with the axe she'd used earlier on the chicken. All the key props in the film have a follow-up scene (eggs, chicken, soup, axe, razor); there's even an echo of the earlier worm hallucination, as we see the rapist's tie, soaked in blood, curled in the bathtub with one end in the plughole, further support for the notion that Lisa's original trauma is sexual in origin.

Billy's role in the film is to extend the director's sympathy to Lisa. He interrupts her when she's contemplating taking her own life, he (unwittingly) helps her drag the trunk containing Lomax's corpse up into the attic, then, when he looks inside the trunk and sees Lomax's limbless corpse (a sight we don't share, dismemberment fans), he implacably asks Lisa who did it, displaying naïve trust in her innocence (or is it just an inability to believe that a sweet young girl could murder a big Lomax-like Lomax?). But whatever the rescue fantasy Billy has for Lisa, he's barking up the wrong tree. He only narrowly (and again inadvertently) diverts Lisa's plan to murder him too; and at the climax, after Lisa has murdered Steele, he finds Steele's ring in the suspiciously blood-hued soup Lisa serves him. The ring is her reproach for Billy's complicity with Steele and Lomax. It would seem that forgiveness is not part of Lisa's character.

Lisa's killing of Steele is compelling, but as a climax it's slightly undercooked. Lomax has already attempted rape, and died for it, so when Steele does the same it brings a feeling of depletion to the narrative. His decision to molest Lisa in front of her grandfather adds an extra frisson of sadism, but the duplication of a sexual attack, in a film as economical and minimalist as this, is a slight mis-step. The molestation, however, is conveyed with a return to the edgy, frantic editing of the opening hotel-room scenes, and there's no doubt that Lisa's axing of Steele is a welcome dramatic outcome: it's just that by having Lisa kill both Lomax and Steele for attempted rape, the film, which runs barely sixty-eight minutes, stands on its own toes somewhat. If Steele had turned his sadistic (rather than sexual) impulses on the paralysed grandfather, it might have been preferable in dramatic terms.

When Steele's ring turns up in the soup that Lisa serves to Billy, it changes the way we view Lisa. We've seen so little evidence of subterfuge in her that at first viewing I thought the twist was corny and senseless, a cheap jolt. When you consider, though, that Lisa must have placed the ring there deliberately, we must evaluate her anew as a judge of Billy's actions - not just a victim seeking to protect herself - and clearly not as disconnected from reality as we thought. If she's capable of passing judgement, her earlier actions take on a different hue. If Lisa can place the ring in the soup to remind Billy of his complicity, then perhaps feeding her grandfather raw eggs is not a sign of dissociation but a deliberate symbolic reproach. Then there's the soup itself: the climax is edited to imply that the bright red soup Lisa serves is mixed with Steele's blood. I say 'imply' because even at this late stage, Friedel declines to make things obvious. Billy

Kidnapped Coed (1975)

It started with Patti: where will it end?
original trailer as *The Kidnap Lover*

Teenager Sandra Morely (Leslie Rivers), daughter of a wealthy businessman, is abducted by kidnapper Eddie Matlock (Jack Canon). Eddie makes a ransom demand to Sandra's father, then checks in at a rundown hotel with his terrified captive in tow. Room service arrives, but the two men at the door are toting guns, not towels. Sandra thinks she's being rescued by the cops, but instead the men beat up Eddie, tie Sandra to the bed and rape her. Eddie, who's horrified to see Sandra molested, escapes from his bonds and shoots the two men, taking his captive back on the road. While waiting for the money to be dropped at the appointed spot, Eddie keeps on the move, from a disused barn in a remote beauty spot to a beach and a succession of farms. As hostage and kidnapper get acquainted, Sandra begins to find Eddie both funny and attractive. After an encounter with some hostile backwoods rednecks, the couple eventually pull in at a farmhouse and ask to stay the night. The old farmer who greets them agrees to their request, and over dinner reveals that he used to be the local sheriff. Observing the tension between the visitors, and their beat-up appearance, the old man's suspicions are raised, but he's thrown off the scent when he sees evidence of the growing bond of intimacy that has developed between his two guests. Next morning he slips and attacks them with a pitchfork, Eddie panics and shoots the old man, and Sandra runs away in horror. However, the two lovers eventually make up and decide to stay together, fleeing Sandra's father of the ransom and going on the run.

Friedel's companion piece to his wonderful *Axe* takes us on another engagingly downbeat journey through a melancholic rural America. Best known today as *Kidnapped Coed* (the Harry Novak rental under which it has been released on DVD), the story line of what started out as *The*

Kidnap Lover is built up from a slow accumulation of fragments, cameos of rural degeneration and small-town decay, and apparent narrative discords. While the tension is sometimes diluted by slow pacing, *Kidnapped Coed* is riveting in its photographic beauty and its depiction of two increasingly warm and sympathetic lead characters. It has the structural looseness of certain earlier directors, and although the storyline is thin, the approach to the telling is creative and highly distinctive. It's really a tragedy that Friedel was not showered with plaudits and offers of further directing gigs after this, as I would love to see what he would have done two or three years later.

Actress Leslie Rivers is strikingly subtle and convincing as Sandra Morely, the victim who grows to love her kidnapper, while Jack Canon is again an actor with the potential for greatness, playing Eddie Matlock as a morally ambivalent character struggling against his finer feelings, a wannabe villain who's bitten off more than he can chew. Their relationship is developed in a spare and unshowy way that never misses a beat, thanks to the rapport between the actors, and to Friedel's gentle, considerate direction. Eddie is drawn with real delicacy (for instance, the first time we glimpse the character's vanity and insecurity is when he drives through a small town - Fort Mill, South Carolina, just a few miles over the border from Charlotte) and passes a young boy sat on the kerb who slips him the bird. "Little bastard," Eddie mutters. We immediately understand that his ego is so fragile, even a five-year-old glimpsed on the roadside can get his goat. Canon breathes real life into this role when Eddie wakes up after a night asleep in the car, and yawns, you see him wince and cuss under his breath - the reflex yawn having him thanks to the kick in the face he received the day before during the hotel room attack. This, a medium-to-long shot is barely observed by the camera and so quietly added by the actor it's possible even Friedel was unaware he was planning it. Cinematographer Austin McKinney is on the ball too: a partially collapsed barn set in misty morning fields gives him another chance to show off his photographic skill, and Friedel the chance to set up some artistic compositions, framing the landscape through broken wood and abandoned farm machinery.

You can imagine this movie played higher up the Hollywood scale, with a young Jack Nicholson as Eddie and Sissy Spacek in the role of Sandra. You'd take the anti-authoritarian streak in Eddie and play it up to heroic heights, give Sandra's lack of concern for her family a sociological spin, and bingo: *Five Easy Pieces* meets *Balllands*. A director like Bob Rafelson might have mined the scenario for greater social comment, but Friedel's pacing, his eye for composition, and the careful, emotionally honest performances make such pat-out-game recasting redundant. *Kidnapped Coed* is great the way it is and there's enough here to suggest that Friedel could have scored a hit with the wider film-going public if he'd been supported at the right point in his career.

As you watch *Kidnapped Coed*, you feel doors open on all sides, permitting a glimpse into other stories, other narrative directions, shown for a second then swiftly left behind. The first of these occurs when Eddie takes his captive to a rundown hotel for the night, only to stumble into a crime scene without realising it. Two hoods have murdered the *maître d'* (presumably just minutes before) but weirdly, instead of taking off they hang around, assuming the role of hotel staff and checking the "couple



a. We are given no more information about their criminal escapade: we don't know who they are or why they're doing what they're doing. Their intrusion into the story of Eddie and Sandra has an existential quality. They are simply there, and it's random bad luck that brings them all into contact (as much for the two hoods, who end up dead, as for poor Sandra, whom they rape).

Loneliness, isolation, cries that go unheard, help that doesn't come—these are the motifs of the film, explored through sometimes wrenching, sometimes amusing vignettes. Sandra tries to write a plea for help on a toilet roll, chucking it out the hotel window ten stories up; but when it lands in the gutter on the street below, two kids pick it up and kick it, leaving just a trail of soggy paper. No one is going to read. When Eddie shoots the rapist, Sandra gets drenched in blood, her shriek echoes around the backyard of the hotel tenement block, but the only person we see is an old man sat impassively in a rocking chair, either too deaf or too senile to react. Later, the quiet scenes at the barn are interrupted by noises Eddie thinks could be the police approaching. Instead it's a group of middle-aged women, birdwatchers, eyes glued to binoculars which they point resolutely upwards at the geese, oblivious to Sandra's plight.

Many seem perverse to praise an exploitation flick for subtlety, but it's as important to Friedel's films as subterfuge was to David Burton's *I Drink Your Blood* or sadism to Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left*. (2) Panic not, horror fans, there's still rape, bullets, and death by scythe to prevent the film becoming too laid-back, but the gentleness is something that extends beyond Sandra and Eddie's characterisations and into the overall climate of the film. In a review in the gazette *Shuck & Spree* in 1989, writer David Kerekes described the film as "peaceful", and although it's a very specific description, I think I know what he means. There's a sense of the rough handling that usually passes for narrative construction, no sense of the writer's ego yanking the viewer's chain, leading us from set-up to conflict to resolution. Actions are so embedded in the environment that they're often beguiled simply by where we are. More so here than in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Friedel's style tends away from the main thread of the story, relaxing to take in snapshots and vivid tableaux of rural life, some of which have barely a tangential relationship to the plot. This digressive, non-linear approach gives a three-dimensional life to the story, without insisting that the incidental details be sewn into a pattern pre-determined by the central relationship. The two leads are constantly being thrown off-course or thwarted by unexpected occurrences from the periphery. When Eddie's car breaks down and he walks to a nearby farm to ask for water, the almost psychopathic hostility of the farmers is shocking, not so much for what they say as for the rude and unwelcome way their stony-faced hatred cuts across the story.

The pacing grants this *non sequitur* equal prominence to other more directly motivated scenes, and yet Eddie has to retreat, without water or assistance, in a scene that both humiliates and further humanises him. We are given no explanation for the farmers' hostility—better still, we sense that Eddie's arrival has occurred at some mysterious moment of crisis. He's an ace away from being shot for trespassing, and the fury that greets him suggests a whole subplot to which we're deliberately denied access. Canon saves the scene for awkward comedy, wringing maximum discomfort from the clash between his firmy hard-man

persona and the mud-dog-on-a-frayed-leash fury of the old farmer. His actor's insister to make the most of this scene gives Friedel's perverse narrative digression an emotional alibi. It all feels as if we're just a field away from the events of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*: in the bushes near the farm we see numerous clapped-out cars, and in the driveway a filthy, battered old bus. What these derelict vehicles are doing there we never find out, but you feel the same ominous buzz that Hooper's film conjured so well.

Other incidental details accumulate, as Friedel makes choices that foreground incident over structure. (Compare his approach with Robert Endelson's stripped-to-the-bone functionalism in the excellent but diametrically opposed *Fight for Your Life*.) Perhaps the strangest and most opaque *non sequitur* in the film occurs when the fleeing couple, now aware of each other's growing affections, ask for



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Kidnapped Coed appeared briefly on US video under this obscure title, a reference to the house which house is being referred to in a film that spends much of its time outdoors in

appropriate rape

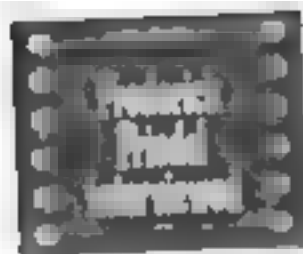
Leslie Rivers brings a plausible role of abducted rich-girl Sandra to the film. In Kidnapped Coed

shelter at another isolated farm, owned by a taciturn old man and his silent daughter (shades of *Axe*). The farmer, a retired sheriff who invites the fugitives to eat at his table but suspects something isn't kosher, is a beat behind the truth, confused by the fact that the victim has fallen for her captor. So far, so suspenseful. Next morning, though, all hell breaks loose: the old man attacks the couple in a fury, chasing Eddie with a scythe, and raving like a man possessed. There is simply no explanation for his rage: we have to fill in imaginary brushstrokes ourselves. It's as if the world itself is trying to reject the Kidnap Lovers, everyone with whom they come into contact poses an unpredictable threat. The attack precipitates a reckless act of self-defence from Eddie, who shoots the old man, causing him to fall on his scythe. Despite the evident provocation, Sandra is horrified to see Eddie kill and reverts to her spoiled rich-girl morality, running away into the open countryside, screaming.

Murderer Eddie, himself appalled by the killing, runs after Sandra pleading for forgiveness.

One of the strangest, most oblique scenes in Friedel's work then occurs when Sandra, having run into the middle of nowhere, spots a man walking along a mud path nearby. She goes to him for help but is greeted with an anguished response: "I'm blind, lady, can't you see that? I'm blind." We are in the middle of the countryside, with no buildings or signs of life around. The appearance of this strange, helpless man adds an absurdist dimension to a film that has already flirted with the arbitrary and random. He's like a character from Beckett, limping by on his lonely tangent. This is truly a universe where nothing can be trusted, and help is never at hand.

Where low-budget horror films are excoriated, poor writing or post-production tampering often account for lapses of coherence, but when the lapses assume their own patterns we have to sit up and take notice. Accidents and commercial pressures acknowledged, these movies are cut from a different cloth to the standard forward licks of *The Toolbox Murders* or *Don't Answer the Phone*. If you insist on a utilitarian approach to Friedel's work, you could, I suppose, argue that lack of funds accounts for some of his idiosyncrasies. On the other hand, I would say that an artist's character is revealed by his choices under pressure and Friedel's artistic choices are consistent enough to be considered the mark of a stylist. He himself says that he made *Kidnapped Coca* too soon after *Axe*: that he didn't have time to sit back and consider the mistakes he'd made in the first film and so made them again in the second. Perhaps over the years since he made these movies, he has had too much time to rue the impulsive, intuitive choices that set his work aside from the commercial mainstream. Personally, I feel that if Friedel had received sympathetic reviews and some fair recompense from distribution, he might have gone on to essay the style of these two films into something even better. From the vantage point of the 21st Century, they do indeed feel slow in comparison to the norm for horror and exploitation. But there's more to life than speed: the sympathy that Friedel extends to his characters, the loose, digressional narrative, and the focus on outsiders, be they criminals, the mentally ill or simply the lonely, as well as his beautiful and eerie portraits of rural Southern settings, all ensure that Frederick Friedel stands out from the crowd. Given the chance to make films for the drive-in circuit, he took the bare minimum of exploitation material and bought himself the license to direct unconventional movies that hover between genre and something closer to art cinema.



Frederick Friedel's *Axe* and *Kidnapped Coca* are two of my favourite films in this book. Although their exploitation retitlings and lurid poster artwork suggest the more brutal end of the horror spectrum, they have a curious quality that beckons beyond the usual plot mechanics. Don't get me wrong: both films do indeed subject the audience to disturbing eruptions of violence, the horror hard-core launched by distributor Harry Nevak, who picked up these two independent regional productions in 1977, is based in actual content. It's just that there's something else going on. Friedel has real compassion for his characters, not a common attribute in the exploitation arena, and the unsettling quality of his work springs as much from his ability to evoke a certain and lonely mood as from his visceral horror scenes. He was a strange man when he made these movies, and he basically taught himself the job as he went along, bringing spontaneity to his work, an openness to his surroundings and circumstances. As well as being great exploitation films, *Axe* and *Kidnapped Coca* are lucid and evocative portraits of the places they were made. Because the stories are told so loosely, we have the chance to see things through the images, if

ignored if the narrative were faster and more conventional. Some might find the films undisciplined, and if you're looking for stories that snap together with a satisfying click at the end, you'll likely feel unrewarded. Likewise, there's not a trace of the corkscrew or Friedel plotting instead of drawing clear lines and vertices to demarcate the story, his approach is to let things take form according to impulse. With the exception of the characters played by Jack Cannon—his leading man in both films—and Leslie Rovers, the female lead in *Kidnapped Coca* (both of whom gave detailed and credible performances), he favours enigma over psychology and declines to divulge background information about the characters. The supporting cast are encountered like strange, isolated figures; their motivations are largely opaque. Friedel's training as a photographer may have informed this preference for enigma, as his characters appear in the frame with only their carefully chosen faces to suggest their character background. But more of this later.

Moving to Florida: a Dangerous Flirtation with Talent and the Early Short Films

Frederick Friedel was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1948, and raised in Malver, a small town on Long Island. His father was a prodigy who skipped five grades in school and graduated in Law before he was twenty-one. Friedel Sr's cousin was also a prodigy, a doctor by the same age, and this high-flying family background was to prove both a spur to action and a burden of guilt for Friedel Jr. His mother provided the artistic side of the family equation: she was a professional dancer who had danced on Broadway when she was just fifteen, another family prodigy. "Water Winchell", one of the most famous newspaper columnists, wrote that she was the most beautiful woman on Broadway," Friedel recalls. "She looked a bit like Vivien Leigh. Errol Flynn asked her out

but she was so young she was being chaperoned by my very religious grandmother to and from the theatre. She was asked to come to Hollywood for a screen test but she decided to marry my father instead.” Friedel sees his mother’s journey, from promising *ingenue* to wife of a successful lawyer as a formative influence on his own ambitions: “Jung said that nothing affects a child more than the un-lived dreams of their parents, and I’m sure my love of movies and my burning desire to make them come from her thwarted dreams. She was a tremendous combination of beauty and an incredible sense of humour – believe had she pursued it she might have been another Carole Lombard or Lucille Ball.”

With a host of early achievers in the family, it’s no wonder that the cinema’s foremost prodigy, Orson Welles, should have provided the inspiration for Friedel’s film career. “My first memory of the cinema may have been seeing *Citizen Kane* on TV as a little child. My parents also took me to Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan for my birthdays to see movies like *The Ten Commandments*, *The Spirit of St. Louis* and *The Greatest Show on Earth*. The chorus line of dancers performed a show before the movies came on. I also remember taking me to see *Psycho* and *An Affair to Remember*. We had a four-screen movie theatre in Malverne and my mother took me as a little boy to see Brigitte Bardot in *And God Created Woman*. To this day I adore Brigitte Bardot. You never forget your first love, especially when you’re three years old. I have the giant French poster of *Le mépris* hanging on my wall.”

In the early sixties Friedel’s father moved the family to Florida, having bought a motel and hotel on Miami Beach after attending high school in Miami. Friedel – who at the time harboured fantasies of becoming a professional golfer enrolled at The University of Florida, which had one of the country’s best golf teams. However, he soon realised he was outclassed in the golfing arena and, thank goodness, looked for another outlet for his energies.

The University had no real film course but it did have an excellent photography department. Friedel was instantly drawn to movie-making. “In the one course available I did a short 16mm film starring my journalism teacher Dwight Godwin,¹ and another student dressed up as a clown. Dwight is standing on a hillside, long grey hair, distinguished looking, with the clown sitting to his left. Two solitary figures in the landscape, against a grey sky. Between them, suspended from a long rope, dangles a knife (I hadn’t even thought about this for years, but, alas, slowly coming back...). The film opens at black with a cue card (influenced by my philosophy/theatre studies, no doubt) that reads, *It has been over a hundred years since a bowed out and left man in center stage. I do hope the audience is kind* (Mr. pretentious? Nah...). Anyway Dwight begins to insult the little clown with a series of scathing remarks, like calling him a syphilitic tumour on the backside of an ape, until the clown rises and takes the knife and stabs Dwight repeatedly in the back with all the attendant agony and screams. It was pretty effective, if a bit depressing. Upon reflection I realise I was unconscious & dramatising, rather nakedly, my own relationship with my father, who could be verbally caustic and leave one feeling like a clown. I remember screening it later at MIT in class, and one of the students from Harvard came up to me and said he felt sorry for me. I didn’t understand what he meant until now. I must have been pretty unhappy.”



Friedel showed the film to John Terry, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), who offered to let him study there for a year. “I thought it would be a good way to get my hands on a camera and some film,” Friedel says, “so I took him up on it, even though MIT really specialized in documentaries. They had Ricky Leacock there of Leacock-Pennebaker fame,² and another professor who wrote one of the textbook bibles of the day. I remember asking him a dumb question like, ‘Which is better, a tracking shot or zoom?’ and he replied, ‘What’s better, a kick in the arm or a kick in the leg?’ Ah, once again that familiar clown-like feeling.

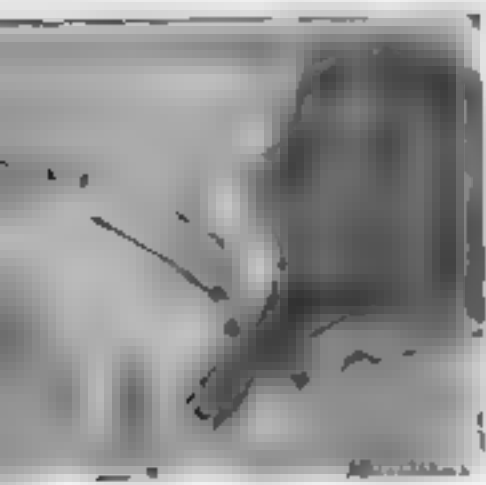
Once installed at MIT, Friedel began work on an ambitious short film, using Walden Pond (the famous beauty spot near Concord Massachusetts immortalized by the American essayist Henry David Thoreau) as a location. As Friedel recalls, “I believe one of the key images dealt with actors emerging from the water in the foggy mist-filled dawn, their bodies whited from the waist up. I believe the lead was a Thoreau-like figure walking with a cane in silhouette against numerous sunrises/sunsets. And somehow it ended up with a man (my roommate David) reaching into the water and pulling out a mirror image of himself. All very symbolic in a very un-thought-out way. Anyway, armed with this dazzling concept I interviewed actors at Boston University’s famous drama department. I even went to Emerson, another big theatre school in Boston, to look for actors. What chutzpah! I’m sure on some level I must have been trying to meet girls (I was pretty shy). So the moment arrives, it’s winter and cold as hell, and my dutiful actors shed some of their clothes and don white makeup and wade into the classic American landmark, Walden Pond. We start filming and police cars come screaming up and Frederick Von Stroheim yells out, ‘Keep filming till they arrest us!’ It all seemed so very important back then. I wish I could figure out what it all meant. A few years later when I was in New York casting *Kidnapped Coed*, an actor handed a note with his \$ x10, saying, ‘Does this sound familiar?’ It’s six a.m. and I’m half-naked standing on Walden Pond, and the police pulled up.

Frederick Friedel (centre, 3667) in his black comedy *My Next Funeral*

opposite page, strip of images from 1990
Eddie, Jack Canon, overpowers Sandra &
Kidnapped Coed
Two hoodies (Larry Lambert &
Blankinship) burst in to Eddie’s hotel room

Eddie and Sandra fall for each other
The couple spend
belonging to Eddie

when the following day, and



A shroooc chopping chickens leaves Lisa subjected to slaughter

Miami Los Angeles – New York
Columbus Charlotte – Lisa, Lisa

After abandoning a further short film ("Christ walking on water only to divide his own image with a buzz saw – a very modern carpenter"), Friedel left college: "The first thing I did when I left was to play Macduff in a production of *Macbeth*; the second was to make *Axe*," he laughs. Things didn't move *quite* that swiftly, but Friedel, a young man in his early twenties, was certainly not wasting any time. "I moved to Los Angeles right after getting out of college," he recalls. "At the time my heroes were Woody Allen and Orson Welles. I was also inspired by the fact that Orson Welles had made *Citizen Kane* at twenty five. Not drawing any parallels between his unique genius and my abilities, but I was determined to make my first feature by that age. And the clock was ticking. I wrote a screwball comic western (before *Blazing Saddles* came out) that had the distinction of making Walter Shenson, the producer of the early Beatles comedies, call me and tell me he laughed so hard he fell off the toilet. (Apparently that's where he did his reading...) The script was outrageously funny but very raw and hardly a movie. It did convince my girlfriend Judy I had talent, and when I told her I was going to New York to see if I could raise money from my relatives to do a low-budget feature, she arranged for me to meet her businessman father from Georgia, who would be in New York at that time. I remember taking my last few dollars and traveling to New York with the mindset that I would either get a movie made or 'die trying.' Really, very much that sort of fatalistic/romantic mission. I went to a number of my rich relatives to find investors. One gave me a five-dollar cab fare to get me home. The other said if I came up with other investors, he would invest \$2,500. That's when I met Irwin Friedlander. Judy's father in a hotel in Manhattan. We hit it off immediately and he said if I met him in Columbus, Georgia, in a couple of days when he went back, he'd see if his friends were interested. I was out of money, so I went to a company that needs drivers to drive people's cars to other cities. I got a car and drove twenty-four hours straight to Georgia and was waiting on Irwin's doorstep when he got home. Irwin owned a chain of clothing stores so he gave me some new clothes and got a group of his friends together (he became the executive producer) and that's how I raised the \$25,000 to make the movie. He was a real angel who became like a second father to me.

Friedel originally intended to shoot his feature debut in Atlanta, but changed the location to Charlotte in North Carolina on the suggestion of Edward Montoro, a film distributor with whose company, Film Ventures International, Irwin Friedlander had investments. Charlotte – a thriving business centre built on the first verified gold mines to have been discovered in the USA, was already the home base for several low-budget productions in the early seventies: down the road was the small town of Shelby, where actor/producer-director Earl Owensby built his own studio facility. Montoro suggested that Friedel and Friedlander should approach North Carolina producer-director Pat Patterson. "Ed told us they were making low-budget movies in Charlotte, NC and gave me Pat's number," says Friedel. "Pat was a very interesting fellow. He was an ex-magician (his wife Nina was part of his magic act) who made low-budget horror

movies. He had a giant warehouse in the middle of a field that he called Empire Studios because in his words, he was 'building an empire.' It was a tribute to my naivete that I didn't smile at this remark. He was short, slightly built and a bit odd looking, but he said he knew how to make movies on a budget and I knew nothing, so I hired him to help me produce. He spoke with a Southern accent and had an imperious authoritative tone that convinced you he knew what he was doing." Friedel pauses. "When I saw a few minutes of his movie *The Book Shop* (aka *Doctor Gore*, I was so shocked by its amateurishness that I made an immediate decision never to listen to any possible 'creative suggestions' he might ever have. I knew in that area, even though I had never done a movie, I would have to be on my own. I believe that resolve solidified my decision to frame every shot myself and have total control of the film, for fear of being negatively influenced.

As anyone who has sat through *Doctor Gore* will agree, aesthetic judgement was indeed the least of Patterson's assets, but Friedel is quick to stress that he appreciated his support, and liked the man himself. "One time when we were in Empire Studios he screamed and showed me his bleeding finger. It turned out to be some sort of magic trick. Ironically a little time later he did slice his finger and was bleeding badly and I thought it was another trick! He went to a doctor and used self-hypnosis to avoid anaesthesia for the stitching. He claimed he could hypnotize anyone, including himself. I found out later from Jack Canon that Pat was actually suffering with the first stages of cancer during the filming of *Axe*. He would sometimes lie down to rest, but he never let on that he was ill. He died not very long after that. I felt terrible when I found out. I had decided that I'd learned enough to produce the second movie without him. And I know he was hurt by that. I remember him saying that *Axe* was the first real script he had ever had, and he kept saying I was a real pro, even though it was my first movie. Had I known how sick he was I would have used him for the second movie. He came to a screening of it and complimented me on it, saying he was proud of how much I had earned. He was a very sweet man."

Friedel's make-up artist on both films was Worth Keeter, who went on to work first as a low-budget director on movies for the Earl Owensby studio, such as *Hoffman* and *Reinwater*, and then as a director on the hugely popular *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* TV series. "Pat introduced me to Worth, who made a valuable contribution to both films," says Friedel. "He was still in high school but he definitely had a way with blood!" Keeter was a native of the area and he knew the various movers and shakers in the local film scene. It was a far cry from the Los Angeles industry, as Keeter explains: "The early North Carolina film business had no reason to exist other than a bunch of us wanted to make movies. Most of us had no formal training, so we made it up as we went along. One producer, Henry Smith, had lost an arm and leg to a lightning strike while working for a power company. He used his financial settlement to become a film producer and was involved in an early drive-in hit *Prucherman* [Albert T. Viola, 1971]. Pat Patterson was a carny and a magician. Earl Owensby was a tool salesman. Prior to the home-grown film industry there were really three reasons to shoot in North Carolina. There was the fabulous Biltmore Estate in Asheville, where Peter

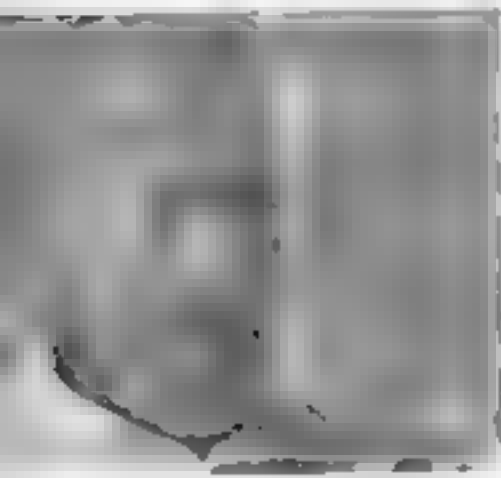
starts again

the script starts from the early 1980s, when *Axe* was once again doing the rounds. This time in the wake of the post-Friday the 13th

accede page strip of images

More scenes from *Axe*, depicting the murder of Audrey, the assault on the shopkeeper, Lisa at home, Loma's assault, Lisa's reaction, and her despatching of Steele

Grandfather (Douglas Powers), locked in his own hell, observes



ing *There* was shot, and the Charlotte Muror
 town. Other than that, there were the mountains made
 as in Robert Mitchum's *Thunder Road*. The home
 ms and the commercials industry trained
 que ans, which later became a major draw for those
 ms as a lower cost. The North Carolina Film
 n was originally an under-funded offshoot of
 sm office. In my opinion, it rode in on the
 s of Earl Owensby and the

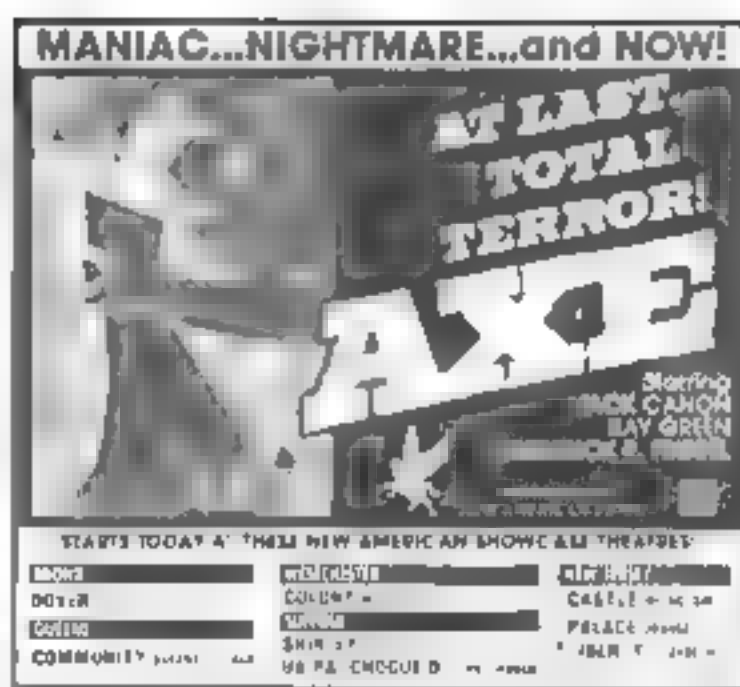
With a budget drawn up, and technical support from
 person in the wires. Friedel was at action stations, his
 movie-making dream now within his grasp. He had
 he script for *Axe* whilst raising the money
 g quickly and bearing in mind a few words of
 om the King of the Indies, Roger Corman
 said you could make *Doctor Zhivago* for
 but it wouldn't be *Doctor Zhivago*. The trick was
 budget movie that was really conceived as
 budget movie. Ergo, a house in the country, few
 actors, few locations, etc. And since this was a drive
 movie there had to be horror, suspense, and people
 d things to other people.

But, this pragmatic template was to leave to
 e moodiest, most haunting drive-in movies of the

Honing the Axe

s a sophisticated and unique cinematic
 A hallucinatory film, induce the claustro-
 phobic, enticse feeling of being trapped with the
 zacters." *Bill Landis, Stetson Express (thunk)*

over its original title *Lisa, Lisa* – was shot in a
 ch-and-a-half days, in the middle of February.
 nematographer was Austin McKinney,
 underused cameraman who, for his sins, had
 acked on three Boris Karloff vehicles made at
 order *Isle of the Snake*
in Summer Invasion and *House of Evil*. As such
 ve it, McKinney had just finished working on a
 e-based film, *Hot Summer in Barfoot County*
 directed by Wil. Zens,³ and he remained in the
 ng enough to shoot both of Friedel's films.
 was recommended to me by Pat Patterson, says
 He was our big gun at \$100 a day, and we'd refer
 our Hollywood DP to him, and he'd
 gettack to our teeny-weeny production in the sticks. I
 eave he was responsible for a lot of the look of
 His lighting gave the film a style that made it
 k a lot better than its budget. He claims that I'm
 possible for giving him interesting things to shoot. Bu
 nk knew enough to visualize the lighting ha
 e would end up with. It seems I'm always giving Austin
 credit and he's always handing it right back to me!
 in mind Corman's dictum. Friedel had scouted
 angle strong location that could act as the focus of
 rema. As it turned out, two were needed to make the
 'green composite' one providing the exterior and
 another the interior. "I went around and found that
 old house and paid the people twenty five
 o use it," he recalls. "The interior was actually a
 drial Gothic residence in Charlotte. That the two fit
 s one place is part of the charm and magic of
 king.



With McKinney's lighting skills and Friedel's eye for the
 framing of a shot, honed during as days as a still photog
 rapher, *Axe* took shape with more style than one might
 expect for a low-budget horror flick. Notwithstanding the
 any budget, Friedel drew his imaginative palette from the
 ch. "Visually I was in the thrall of *Citizen Kane*," Friede
 says, "so any time I could use low angles, deep focus, mood
 lighting, I was eager to do so. The first shot was three
 hoods coming out of the elevator. I loved tracking shots, but
 had no tracks, so I stuck Austin in a grocery cart and
 someone pushed him down the hall. We had so little money
 and equipment. Austin joked that I was trying to kill him
 with all the low angles etc, but later said that my demanding
 this caused him to show just how good he really was. He
 never got asked to try for much on his other films.

One of Friedel's personal judgements was to limit the
 graphic depiction of gore and mutilation. Whilst the film
 has its share of horrific moments, the emphasis is on mood
 and suggestiveness. "I think the most disturbing thing
 playing horror off-camera was more disturbing because the
 audience fills in their own 'worst nightmare'
 thought that it was a little cheap to be too graphic, and it
 just wasn't me," he admits. "I'm not a fan of horror movies
 and didn't go to them or study them. And that probably
 helped the feelings of the movie. On the other hand it
 brought an un-horror-like sensibility to the material. But I
 was a fan of the movie *Repulsion* by Polanski, and have
 a ways felt great sympathy for the mentally ill.

Working without scrutiny or prior training, Friedel was
 self-taught crash course in filmmaking whilst
 shooting a feature. It's this combination of naïveté, ambition
 and creativity that accounts for the personal feel of his
 work. "The first day of shooting was the first time I was
 ever on a movie set," he laughs. "Even the grips had more
 experience than me. My best friend was a teaching assistant
 or the critic Manny Farber, so I asked him to make a few
 suggestions. But it was pretty much pure instinct and not
 much thought. I let it fly." Working with trained actors was
 also new to Friedel (his college films were cast from the
 faculty), but he soon rose to the challenge. "I felt the one
 thing I could count on was that I could tell when someone
 was being phoney or unreal. I had been a still photographer
 so I was aware of what faces can communicate, so I
 became a balancing act between those two instincts. Given
 the demands of such a short shooting schedule, I felt if they
 were just acceptable, i.e. didn't stink, we would be okay.



LISA LISA

The expression vehemence of Axe

communicates the film's real mood

The script called for a young woman to play withdrawn, emotionally disturbed Lisa. Enter Leslie Lee, who gives an unsettling performance. "Leslie had done a little modelling. She was the daughter of the State Senator from North Carolina and was actually quite down to earth despite her privileged upbringing. The key in casting is finding people that have those qualities the characters have, without them having to act. Leslie had a certain quiet angst in her at that time that I felt would be believable as Lisa. Since Leslie was not very comfortable with dialogue I kept hers to a minimum and let her face do her communicating."

Acting alongside Leslie as her mute, paralysed grandfather was Douglas Powers. "Doug as had so much humanity," says Friedel, "he was a child psychiatrist in real life. And those luminous eyes... felt his face could convey the horror he would have to witness."

The third key role brought Friedel into contact with an actor whose screen presence would lift both of his Carolina-shot films. Hitchcock had Cary Grant. Scorsese has Robert De Niro. Orson Welles had, well, Orson Welles. Frederick Friedel, with one foot on the greats and the other on his minuscule budget, knew that he needed a compelling male lead to play the criminal gang leader Steele. An open casting was called in Charlotte, and Friedel wanted to see who would turn up, knowing he might well have to take whoever walked through the door. Fortunately it was smiling Jack Canon became Friedel's leading man in *Axe* and *Kidnapped Love*. A talented actor adept at playing seedy but compelling characters with a sardonic edge, he was a godsend to both productions. "Jack was a director in dinner theatre in Charlotte at the time. So it was great luck to be able to find him, because I only cast locally. I felt he had real charisma and talent... sort of our low-budget Bogey. Jack was so good that it was really just a matter of putting the camera in the right position to capture him. I believe he had previous film and television experience but I can't be sure. I remember him once saying, after I complimented his performance as special, that he was merely dipping into his old bag of tricks. He may have said that partly to underline my own inexperience. I do remember him almost grudgingly saying that while he could direct me under the able hand of a director... in other words he knew a lot more than me. I certainly seemed to know more about directing movies. It was sort of a backhanded compliment, but such was my admiration for him I gladly took it anyway."

Of the other leading cast-members, Friedel says: "Ray Green really looked like the character I wanted and that was more important than any ups and downs in his delivery. I don't remember much about him. I was lucky he came to the auditions too because he was quite a fit for the role... remember not being that happy with him when he was delivering lines, but he embodied so much of Lomax by just walking into the room (or by being dragged down the hall...) that he was very effective. The one performance that really crossed the line in my view and is glaringly wrong is Aubrey (Frank Jones) when he is in the hotel before he is killed. But that was one of the first scenes we shot, and I totally missed it. I believe the director who said there are no bad actors, just bad directors, so the buck stops here on that one. If I had caught it, I could have given him better direction."

Rounding out the cast was Friedel himself as Billy, the younger member of Steele's gang. On the subject of his

work on *Axe*, Friedel says: "I wasn't in too much of the film so I didn't mind being an actor as well as director. It was difficult. Given the 'range' of my performance you can why I always harboured the belief... based on what, I'm not sure, probably ignorance... that acting was easy. As you can tell by the way I shot myself straight down on my head so I resembled a 'bush man'... I gave a lot less thought to presenting myself than I have to the other actors. In my recent movie *My Next Funeral*, I was in every scene, so it was a bit more challenging."

The last scene to be shot was the one in which Steele and his gang hold up a convenience store and terrorize its lone female assistant, played by Carol Miller. "That sequence is very hard to watch now," shudders Friedel. "I chose Carol because of her innate shyness and dignity, not... prurient value. As such you are seeing a real person's feelings and essence being violated and so it is very painful to watch, much more so than if the person is more an exhibitionist. Her suffering moved me to tears then, and it does now, because it was real. With any experience I would not have chosen a person for whom doing the role would cause so much pain. She was so shy we had to clear the set. I used Carol as one of the birdwatchers in *Kidnapped Love* because of what I put her through on *Axe*. It was a role better suited to her temperament."

For Friedel, the shoot was a genuine seat-of-the-pants experience, requiring much improvisation. "We would all go to the location and I would sort of make it up on the spot," he says. "I'm embarrassed to admit that I remember being so tired and feeling that I almost didn't have a minute to get there early and plan. On the last night, when we shot the convenience store mayhem, I remember getting there a half hour early and sitting down with a pad and paper and actually planning out the shots and shooting sequence. That was the only time I did. It went so smoothly that I made a mental note to do that in the future. Since this was my first movie and I didn't know how to make one and I had never seen one made, I didn't know people planned their shots out. I tried it. Talk about the innocence of youth!"

One of *Axe*'s curious distinguishing features is its lack of back-story. Just how did Lisa and her disabled grandfather come to be living together? Where are Lisa's parents? The simplicity and the pared-down dialogue lend the film a suitably isolated ambience but we're left with many unanswered questions at the end. Asked whether the actors did any theorizing about the history of their characters, Friedel says: "I don't know. Actually I didn't even know that was part of the actor's or writer's process at the time, such was my inexperience. I made the grandfather paralyzed simply to increase the jeopardy Lisa would be in and to have her character be someone who is both caring and trapped (and hopefully sympathetic) at the same time."

Another feature of the movie is its extremely short running time; it clocks in at a lean sixty-eight minutes. Friedel explains how this came about. "I have never made a movie that was the proper running time. There is a... page of script to one minute of running time. It has never worked out that way for me. My last movie *My Next Funeral* had a ninety-three-page script and ended up seventy-seven minutes. I believe *Axe*'s script was shortish to begin with. Those protracted opening and closing credits to lengthen it are embarrassing to me now."

I-conceived attempt to add screen time by essentially
 boring the audience to death. My solution to short running
 time has been, instead of writing longer scripts, to
 compound the problem by playing scenes longer than they
 should be. In other words playing scenes interminably to
 me and thereby slowing the whole movie down.
 "Clever huh?" It's sort of like the man who took
 longer strides to save his ten-dollar shoes and ripped his
 pants. In *Lisa* we used almost everything we
 we had to. I did cut out about five minutes of Lisa
 taking care of her grandfather - washing, shaving, etc.
 because it was just excruciatingly slow. I actually snipped
 it in the final print with scissors when I came to my
 edit. The final shooting ratio was 18 to 1. Probably
 the highest. We ended up using out-takes, bits of film
 left after the takes, the same shots over. I didn't know

post-production began immediately after the editing.
 It lasted until the summer of '74. Friedel feels that
 most of the film emerged in the editing. "I don't think
 I really carefully thought out or planned out. I did
 think that there would be some innate suspense built in by
 the motion picture collision of sadistic, capriciously
 evil thugs and an emotionally undisciplined farm girl with
 the capacity to kill." I started editing the film on a Moviola
 in my living room in Charlotte. I remember cutting the
 rape scene in the hotel room first. I kept cutting it shorter
 and shorter because the more funny it became with it, the
 more I liked it. Until I screened it for someone and
 he said so fast they asked, "What was that?" It was then I
 knew I was so close to the material that I needed a
 second opinion to keep me from going off the deep end.
 When someone recommended Avrum Fine, an editor
 in Atlanta, Georgia. So I moved to Atlanta for a couple of
 weeks. We finished the editing. We flew to
 Atlanta to get the music and sound mixed in a couple of
 days. I had an answer print made by Movielab in New
 York, and ten more prints struck.

Friedel's memories of making *Lisa* are coloured by
 events in his personal life at the time. "I fell in love with
 her shortly after I cast her. Apparently she had fallen
 in love and would hang around me patiently until I woke up.
 I realised we were in love. I remember the terrible
 comfort of having to watch the two rape scenes with her
 as the target. It's one thing writing them, but quite another
 seeing the woman you love play them. (It certainly didn't
 hurt my affection for Ray Green as Lomax.) We went
 there for a while. She was separated from her husband
 and she eventually went back to him. Our
 romance was very amiable and sweet. So in addition to the
 duties of directing my first movie there were the
 pleasures of young love. I think the movie sort of
 allowed me with the cool young director aura. Worth
 it. Er once said he felt like Elvis when he started
 singing. Well I probably felt like a very, very minor rock
 star. But before the editing finally took off with Avrum I
 was feeling pretty hopeless. Like I said, I was
 it all. And I had fantasies of just going off
 someplace to lead a quiet anonymous life."

Once Avrum Fine became involved in the editing
 process, however, Friedel's spirits lifted, even more so
 when the marvelous, eerie score by George Hewman
 was added. "We were added," says Friedel.
 "George was a blue-eyed angel with long blonde hair
 and a Southern charm. He was a real nice guy. I thought



about casting him as Billy for a while. His mother was a
 famous American painter named Mary Cassatt, and
 John was a sweet, shy brown-haired version. Both were
 smart, funny, and gifted musicians. They were like
 brothers and creative soul mates. George was also a
 soundman on the movie. We went to a studio in
 Charleston, South Carolina and did the music in one day.
 It was very fortunate that we had the movie after it
 fit. They also helped with the sound effects. I think we
 did the sound effects for the movie by having



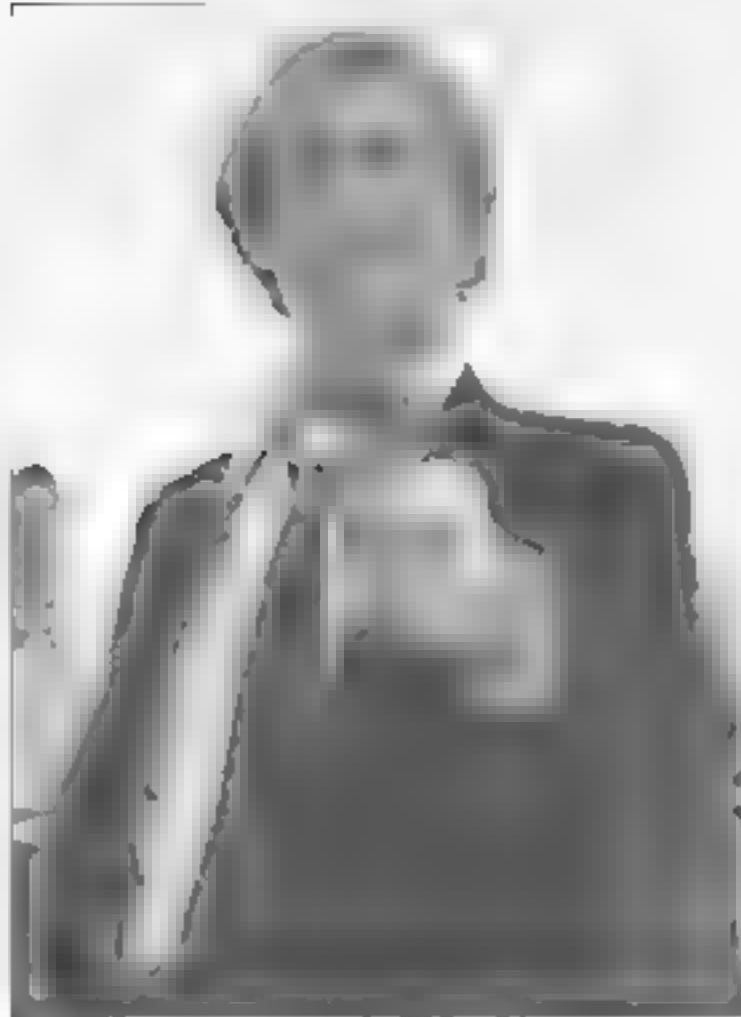


the sleazy-sounding **Kidnapped Coed** when retitling Friedel's

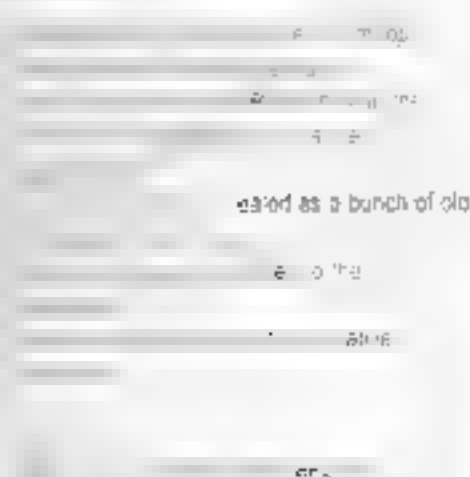
a London broth with a spoon and snapping a piece of celery immediately afterwards?

Friedel's relief that his first feature film had been completed was matched by his enthusiasm for the results. "When *Axe* was completed, I was happy with it. I felt it was as good as I could have done under the circumstances. And I sort of got swept up in everybody's positive reaction to it. What wasn't prepared for was how horrible and disgusting turning some people found it. The dichotomy between the exciting and playful experience of using red in these scenes—food colour and corn syrup... and how truly horrifying it becomes to an audience when music effects and editing are added, is truly head-spinning. I think it's a great out-of-college fun and games."

bothered some people, my highbrow friends and relatives included. Some of them asked me how I could make such a horrifying movie, and do such terrible things to these people? Didn't they know it was just a movie? They believed it was evidence of something dark lurking beneath the surface! *The Los Angeles Times* reviewed it as "one of the L.A. Times reviewing a \$25,000 movie!"—and attacked me for doing terrible things to an underage girl (Leslie was twenty-two). Had I been less mortified I could have taken that review and parlayed it into a three-picture horror deal, but I really didn't want to do horror movies. I was already working on an adaptation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*! only screened *Lisa* once myself, at MovieLab in New York, watching for colour correction with the executive for MovieLab, and a college friend—they said they were impressed. The 'premiere' was in a drive-in, in Charlotte, North Carolina! There we all were, sitting in the front seats of our respective cars, listening to our opus on the tiny little sound boxes hanging inside our windows. When it was over we got out and went to the concession stand in back to see what reaction people had to the movie, looking for any excuse to revel over our triumph. Actually I think I was too nervous to 'revel'."



the sleazy-sounding **Kidnapped Coed** giving the **Kidnapped Coed** more impact through her intensely



The positive reaction to the movie gave Friedel the confidence to roll the dice again: "People kept saying, 'he should do it was the best thing to come out of this year.' I thought, 'I've got to do it.' I did it. Another so we'd have two 'successful' movies out there. I had read that the best time to let's say, let's say, let's say, let's say, your first is about to come out, before you know whether it's a hit or not. So when the first screening went well, I called Friedy—as my partner (Irwin was known) and an old friend—somewhat convinced him that having two successful movies was better than one. In other words, let's just keep cranking them out. I was so enthralled with the experience of making them I couldn't bear the thought of stopping. This decision in a sense took my eye off the business end of selling *Axe*, which came back to haunt me, and I wasn't fully discussing the financial consequences. The first one couldn't reach so the second movie suffered the same storytelling problems as the first."

Kidnapped Coed

It was around this time that Friedel met another of the local players: studio boss, actor, director and one-man exploitation industry Earl (Wensky). "I only met Earl at a screening of his movie *Challenge* (1974)," Friedel recalls. "I'm not sure I even was formally introduced. Warren Keeter said he asked me what I thought of it afterward and I said I thought the *Panther*⁴ was the best thing in it. I don't remember saying that, but the arrogance it conveys has a familiar ring to it. I probably was jealous about all the money he could spend on his movies. I think *Challenge* cost \$250,000—ten times what I had for *Axe*. I guess I felt Earl was using his money to make himself a movie star, something that would never have happened any other way. I never saw any of his other movies or the ones that Worth made for him."

With *Axe* playing at the local drive-ins, work quickly began on the second of Friedel's North Carolina films known to British pre-cert video collectors as *Date with Kidnapper* and to drive-in audiences in America as *Kidnapped Coed* (under which title it has surfaced on DVD). It started life as a rough outline called *Night of Shorning* and eventually made its screen debut as *The Kidnap Lover*. "It's odd seeing all the titles that have been hung on my movies by distributors in hopes of enticing an audience," Friedel says. "My first movie I called *Lisa Lisa*, using the title to cue the protagonist in a rather innocent way in order to set up the irony of her turning into *The Terminator*. Calling it *Axe* (which distributor Larry Novak did in a second) was a way of announcing the impending horror. And then they changed it to the *P.M.*, which I felt totally undercut the element of surprise and irony." It was also Novak's decision to retitle *The Kidnap Lover* as the far more salacious *Kidnapped Coed* (no doubt trading on contemporary headlines about the so-called 'Coed Killer' Edmund Kemper whose brutal serial murders terrorized the San Joaquin area of California in 1972). Friedel shrugs. "I guess that's why they call them 'exploitation movies'."

Buoyed by the experience of working with Jack Canon on *Axe*, Friedel cast the actor in the central role of the kidnapper who falls in love with his captive. "I figured if a little bit of Jack was good, then a lot of him was great. I knew he was a terrific actor who could be menacing, touching, funny, intelligent, and so I simply



wrote a movie around him that would enable him to be at it. I thought his scene with Leslie in the kitchen was big in the first movie and I wanted more of it. Jack was very much under the spell of Bernardo Bertolucci's work at the time, especially *Last Tango in Paris*, so I sort of made Jack my version of Marion Brandon and wrote lots of scenes with him making his past known, "Last Tango in Charlotte" ... Referring to the episodic plotting of *Kidnapped Coed*, Friedel wryly said, "I thought *Last Tango* was an unfortunate model to choose for an action movie, but such was its spell over me that I was blithely undeterred. I never studied the appropriate movies! I was happy that Jack was able to get some work in his participation in my films, but I always felt with regret and charisma he should have received more."

Also back on board was cinematographer Austin Arner. "I figured with Jack in front of the camera and me behind it I'd be in good shape," says Friedel. "I knew that Austin would bring a beautiful look to the movie. With Canon as one of only two central characters, and a minimal supporting cast, Friedel was going to keep the budget right down. But I was indulging my weakness for beautiful images. I was flying all over the North and South Carolina countryside, even hundreds of miles to the beach for one scene. A less sensible low-budget idea never occurred. I don't know how I budgeted it because the shooting schedule was three times longer than *Axe*—one or twenty three days instead of eight or nine. Anyway, I came up with a budget of \$49,000; that included getting an answer print from the lab. The movie started in the autumn of 1974, with a loose finished script, lacking in structure but rich on quirky incident. Friedel would endow the finished film with a unique episodic dreaminess, although he admits he was flying blind in terms of narrative style. "I actually don't know what a story arc or a third act was, back

then," he laughs. "A lot of the choices of who and what the leads met up with came out of simple ideas. Wouldn't it be funny if this tough-as-nails character ran into some bird watchers? Or an old man who simply spits at him? ... people that would by their nature neutralise his first violent impulses, thwarting his ice-cold persona so he became more human and Sandra would have someone to fall in love with. Jack, in addition to playing hard-as-nails, could be so funny. That's why I let that scene with the old farmer play on and on. I just loved Jack when he mugged for the camera. The farmer with the shotgun never was really going to shoot him, just scare him off. I loved putting him in these ridiculous situations and just turning him loose, not the best strategy for making a tense kidnapping movie, but analysing and thinking things through was not something I indulged in much at that time. In fact, even though the scene is ostensibly about Jack getting water for an overheated car, I never really cared about that, and at a screening for distributors, one of them, Steve Kapan, yelled out to me when the scene was over and we see Jack drive to the next farmhouse: 'Hey, where did he get the water?' I was pretty embarrassed. With Leslie I just thought, wouldn't it be interesting if the one time she decided to run away and get help the person she ran to turned out to be blind?" He pauses, and then with characteristic self-deprecation adds, "Pretty deep thinking, huh?"

Certain scenes, such as the one where the fleeing lovers meet a crazy old farmer and his catatonic daughter, seem to mirror the scenario of *Axe*, although Friedel stresses it's unintentional. "There was really no conscious connection between the farmer in *Kidnapped Coed* and the grandfather in *Axe*. A lot of the time when I was writing I would meet someone who evoked something for me and I would then write a scene for him or her. The actor who played the farmer looked like Santa Claus, and played him a lot around Christmas time. So I thought wouldn't it be interesting if 'Santa Claus' turned out to be crazy? ... again, pretty deep thinking."

"Back then if I had an idea or impulse
I pretty much went with it."

It's worth pausing here to reflect on the (lack of) technique Friedel is describing. He consistently refers to his directing process with a disarming air of apology, self-deprecation. He clearly wishes to present his inexperience honestly, without artistic posturing, and this is entirely admirable: it would have been easy for him to make pretentious claims of an overarching directorial master plan, given the clear stylistic similarities between the two films, I think it would be a shame, though, if Friedel's modesty was allowed to overshadow his achievements. In the course of researching this book I've seen a great many films by inexperienced first-time directors, and they certainly don't all feel like *Axe* or *Kidnapped Coed*. Short schedules, tiny budgets, no exposure to the deathless wisdom of screenwriting guru Robert McKee: these are part and parcel of the low-budget horror film milieu, and yet here is a watermark of intelligence and creativity to Friedel's work that lifts it well above the average for movies made under such conditions.

In some cases, instead of predetermining character by writing a script and then looking for suitable actors, Friedel chose to build a story around people he wanted to film.



This allowed the real world to guide the structure of the story, through stray observations and chance meetings rather than using actors as laboratory rats to run around a pre-determined storytelling maze. While this approach was clearly the result of inexperience, it's hardly controversial to point out that an untutored filmmaker can see possibilities that the rigorously trained cannot. The very qualities that Friedel cites as failings – lack of preparation, impulsiveness, the influence of 'unsuitable' role models like *Last Tango in Paris* and *Crush* – contribute enormously to the idiosyncrasy of his work.

Friedel's habitual modesty is charming, but it shouldn't discourage viewers from regarding his work as creative and experimental in the true sense. Untutored, unpretentious, and bolstered only by his prior experience as a still photographer, Friedel possessed a natural inclination to look for personal meaning in the puzzles of filming, rather than responding to his inexperience by copying the conventions of less ambitious moviemakers. His photographic experience may explain why he chose to create characters on the basis of unusual-looking actors; still photography is not a narrative art, and sure enough some of Friedel's horror films are peppered with fleeting characters who appear in the movies like cameos or snapshots, and who then disappear never to return. They're like figures in the background of a photograph, captured in a split second in an instant of composition – their inclusion cinematic and possibly accidental, leaving us to fantasize their possible relations.

Friedel's other great strength is to trust his impulses as he says, "If I had an idea or impulse I pretty much went with it." This leads to a sequence of narrative events that can seem incredibly arbitrary, but it feels genuine and plausible too. I believe Friedel's spontaneity, and the courage to let it rule the storytelling, explain why his work is so much more interesting than, say, the contemporary efforts of his neighbour, Earl Owen, by whose business acumen is admirable but whose films lack inventiveness and therefore inevitably alter the structural norms of mainstream cinema. By not trimming out his impulses by allowing strange *non sequiturs*, Friedel created something unique. This also, I believe, accounts for the dream-like quality of the two films, the lucid sense of place soaked with an immanent malevolence. Friedel's impulses do not necessarily link up to make an entire subconscious structure that can be explored, like some sunken ship by viewers snorkelling beneath the surface, but as in David Lynch's work they allow a sensation of floating between narrative codes and storytelling currents, deferring closure in a highly individual and measurable way.

Friedel is candid about the way material circumstances dictated some aspects of his movies, aspects that a critic might have read as 'directorial intention'. Are any *Kidnapped Coast* are still guided by intentional creative choices, however impulsive, but what's striking is how even the accidents Friedel describes – for instance when the short film in running time necessitated the use of longer takes in the editing – seem to fulfil some secret blueprint of the movie: things going right whilst seeming to go wrong. The elongated credits for *Are* a low composers Shaw and Williams to shine, as the title theme plays out in its entirety, its mood perfectly matching the feeling of suspended time sustained by the lingering final shot. It

goes to show that creativity can be as much a case of chance as drawing with your hand, as it is with conscious artistic choices. With some of the best there is a greater degree of control over external factors (the real fusion of media – writing, photography, art design etc.), and fused in there too we get the subtle DNA of real life in the form of accidents, worldly pressures, all the organisational headaches and slip-ups that can occur on such a complex undertaking. Maybe that's why cinema, especially low-budget, can feel more real than written storytelling. No one doubts that the extraordinary circumstances on the set of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* fed into the onscreen story and lifted it to a higher state, but it's worth pointing out that even a 'bad' film can exude a sense of

for which a novelist could sweat and labour gruelingly without success! Having said that, it's the temperament of the artist that determines whether an unintended intrusion should be incorporated or fought against. When Herschel Gordon Lewis saw that his 1961 film *The Grossest Twosome* was running under feature length, his solution was to film a cheap five-minute prologue of two polystyrene heads in a wig-shop window 'talking' to each other (via primitive animation) about the story to come. The same problem as Friedel had with *Are* gave rise to two very different and idiosyncratic responses: Lewis's bizarre solution tells you a lot about his peculiar attitude to his work, and Friedel's slowing down of the tempo is perfectly in keeping with the overall mood of his movie. Such 'accidents' of circumstance can reveal instead of obscure the character of the filmmaker.

Kidnap Completion

The film comes to life through its images. Friedel was highly attuned to the possibilities of the region's visual attractions and what *Kidnapped Coast* may lack in formal storytelling terms it more than makes up for in pictorial beauty and its ability to evoke a sense of place. "Part of the fun was just roaming around and letting my eye respond to the North Carolina countryside," he recalls. "It was like having the whole State for a movie set. The place where Eddie hooked up with Sandra was actually two locations – they entered the lobby of a hotel in Concord, North Carolina and went upstairs, to a room in Monroe, North Carolina. In Charlotte, we were at most a few hours drive from everywhere: the small towns, the farms etc. The only scene that required many hours driving and therefore staying overnight on location was the beach scene in South Carolina. We made that trek because we wanted to have Jack praying at sunrise by the water. We had only a few minutes of 'magic light' at sunset to shoot the exterior of the car on the beach. And it got stuck in the sand. So we had to quickly call a tow truck. Which also got stuck in the sand. So we had to call another tow truck to come and tow the first tow truck out before it could get to our car. All of this was happening just outside of the frame where we were shooting! We had to keep shooting because the sun was going down. The next morning we shot the scene, which was quite beautiful."

He continues, "I had been a still photographer so was always in love with beautiful images and that love pretty much drove the movie. I went overboard in shooting anything that my eye responded to. Even Austin chided me about it. Someone once said that when a

director becomes old, he becomes a photographer – in other words he loses his discrimination between the essential and the pictorial. I was so young I had no discrimination at all, just a real love of shooting things. The one thing I didn't realise was how great Audrey Hepburning was until the dailies came back. I don't know that I even knew enough to ask for it back then, other than to say the mood I wanted.

Whether the film is certainly one of the more oblique allies to have played American drive-ins, there is one scene at least that connects with the exploitable subject matter of its likely co-holders: a brutal rape scene in which Sandra is beaten and molested by two people she at first believes have come to rescue her from her captor. Although we see nothing remotely pornographic (not even Rivers's breasts), the tumultuously edited violence – a gun muzzle violently jammed into Sandra's crotch, just out of frame – the assailants shot dead with a bullet to the crotch and the rectum – when added to four very convincing performances, turns this into probably the nastiest scene Friedel has ever shot. He describes his approach. "I felt about the rape scene as I did about the brutal killings, that I never wanted to show anything explicitly, but through suggestion. I felt that showing things explicitly was too easy (and wasn't in my nature and required very little cinematic imagination. I followed Hitchcock's dictum of cinema being a series of pieces of film that add up to something greater in the viewer's imagination, which is one of the reasons the brutal scenes in high movies never feel brutal to shoot, because it was more like putting together the pieces of a puzzle. Leslie's emotions were real but all we shot were separate disconnected images, like an arm tied here, a leg pulled there etc. Hitchcock said that in the *Psycho* shower scene you never actually see a knife touch the body but you are sure you've witnessed an incredibly brutal murder. In *Axe* the axe never touches Steele, but you feel he's been brutally axe-murdered, you never see an axe strike the body of Lomax but you feel he's been dismembered. I only showed the razor on Lomax's neck really to show Lisa's pain and insanity: it's the only explicit image in either movie. In *Kidnapped Coed*, the combination of the images and Leslie Rivers's real emotion was designed to capture the essence of a brutal rape. In *Axe*'s rape scene, Leslie Lee, who was not an actress, never went to the emotional place that Leslie Rivers did, so it was not an emotionally compelling scene – it felt more abstract and disconnected, befuddling her emotional state."

Leslie Rivers brings rich girl Sandra Morely to life in a subtle economic performance. With her freckled face and long blonde hair she's uncannily similar to Sissy Spacek, and her nervous fragility and occasional bursts of rage suggest she too would have made an excellent *Carrie White*. It's a shame that her movie career dried up; her committed performance for Friedel shows a talent that could have propelled her into the mainstream.

Amongst a supporting cast comprising mostly cameos, Friedel himself turns up again, but this time only on the soundtrack. "I decided to play Mr. Morely off-screen because I thought it was unnecessary to make a character of him in the movie. We know what a father's anguish would be in this situation without seeing him. Therefore I thought it wasn't necessary to involve more characters and actors, another low-budget solution) into our mini-budgeted opus. Also, since I was playing Sandra's father

and I was the same age as Leslie Rivers who played Sandra, showing me wouldn't really have worked. I knew if I played him off-camera I could gruff up my voice and sound a bit older."

With such a loose script, it was always going to be hard finding a satisfying ending. Friedel explains, "The original ending had Leslie being shot to death by the hoodlums. I shot it slow motion with Jack screaming and going to pieces. But it was such a downer that it didn't fit with the tone of the rest of the movie, so I had to rethink it. Since I had the footage of hoods pointing a gun at them and the long shot of them driving off into the sunset, the cheapest thing to do was have a voice-over line recorded – 'A right, who's driving the Caddy. Hand over the keys!' and 'Do you believe what's in this suitcase!' – all designed to play over the footage we had. We couldn't afford to shoot anymore. It was a no-budget solution but the only one I could come up with that somehow gave it an ending consistent with the feel of the rest of the movie."

Kidnapped Coed was made in the midst of painful circumstances, as Friedel's father suffered a serious worsening of his health due to cancer. Friedel's mood was then further darkened by another tragedy that struck at the same time. He explains: "The incident involved Leslie Lee (her full name was Leslie Lee Moore). She and I were still close during the making of *Kidnapped Coed*. The long track down the hallway of the Morley residence was shot in her family's home. Leslie's mother, Beth Moore, was Carolina royalty, her husband was State Senator, and she was everything you would expect of the wife of Southern gentry. She was beautiful, vivacious, intelligent, witty – totally captivating. I adored her. She was also very, very unhappy, and I think quite lonely. During the period we were filming she would extend invitations to me to come and visit. We always had a great rapport and I think she just needed someone to talk to. With the filming and my father's progressively terminal illness I was a bit overwhelmed and was never able to make time to see her. I always regretted it." He pauses. "In short, Beth took her life in the most dramatic and horrible fashion. She set herself on fire. It was totally shocking. It became a national story."

As with *Axe*, when it was time to cut *Kidnapped Coed* together, it proved a most too short for an acceptable feature. Friedel had to use nearly all the exposed footage. Still, one scene in particular took padding a little too far. "I yanked about five minutes from the scene where Jack is pacing in the barn after someone at the premiere said the scene was Andy Warholesque," he laughs.

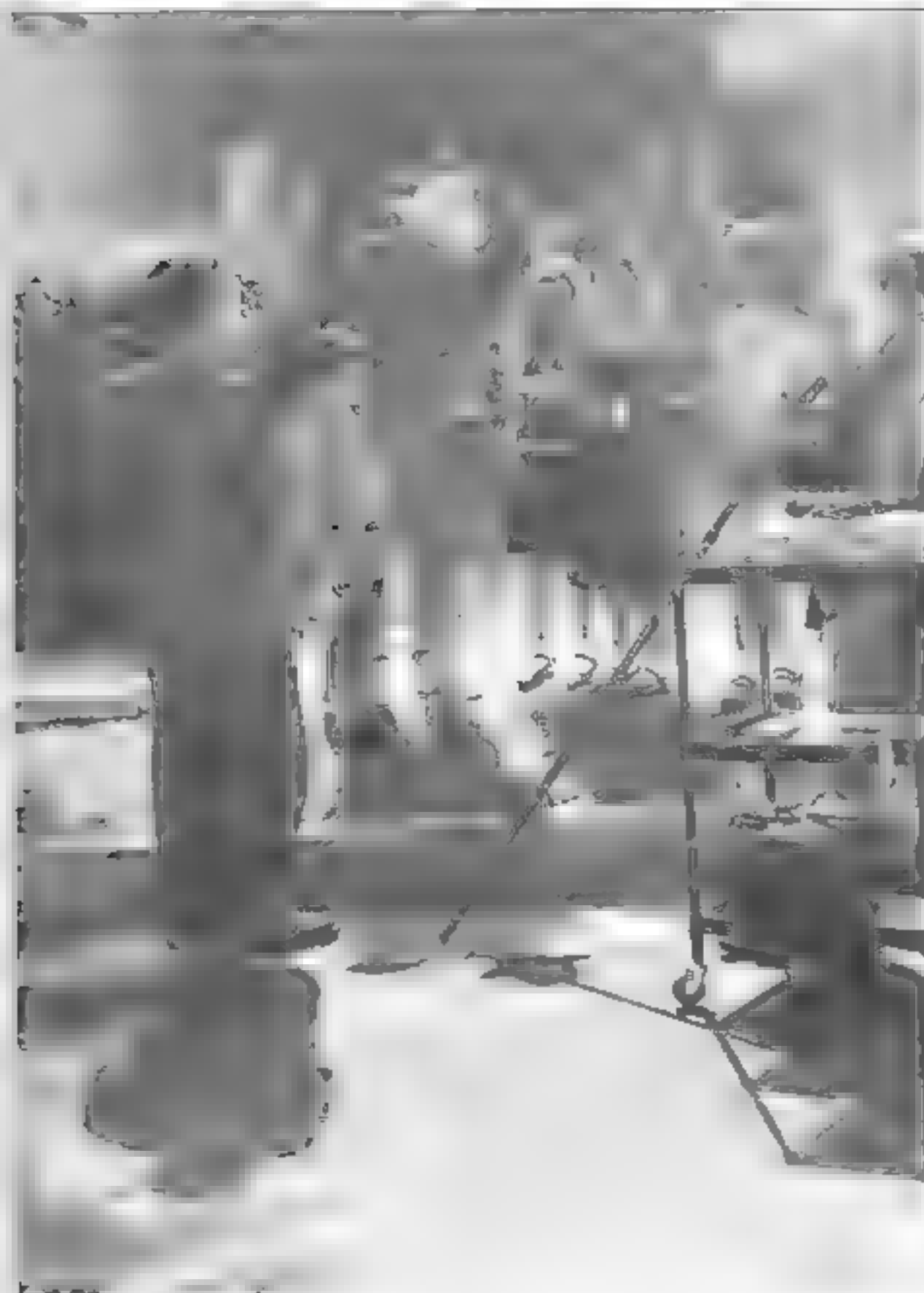
For the music, Friedel once again called on the talents of musicians George Newman Shaw and John White. "We'd make up song lyrics on the spot and they'd create these wacky country songs for the soundtrack – *You're my little baked potato, but you're alright with me. You don't put on airs like no French fry*." However, the mention of George and John saddens Friedel, as he explains: "George always idolised George Gershwin and had huge musical ambitions to match his talent. Very much relating to George's ambition, and wanting to help further it, when I got to New York with my movies I got a big agent and was discussing a film idea with a Vice President of Columbia Records, who I knew I could get to listen to their music. So George and John went back to that South Carolina studio to record some original



Kidnapped Coed first played in North and South Carolina in 1975 as *The Kidnap*



opposite page. Strip of images from the film. Eddie approaches a bearded old man to ask for gas, but the response is one of disinterest. Eddie and Sandra meet a young girl playing in the dirt outside a farmhouse. "I'm blind, lady! Can't you see that?" The blind man ignores Sandra's desperate plea for help. The movie. The censorious 20th Century. The first ending.



My Next Funeral

material. On their way home late one night a truck crossed into their lane and struck them head on, killing them instantly. They were just in their early twenties. To this day I find the grief of this loss is overwhelming.

As Friedel and Avrum Fine worked on the editing they realised there was a similarity between the *Kidnap Lover* story and one of the biggest news events of the year: Patty Hearst's journey from spoiled little rich girl to revolutionary freedom fighter which had begun in February 1974 with her abduction, and went stratospheric with her appearance as a gun-toting member of the SLA during a bank-robbery in April that year. "I only thought of the Patty Hearst connection after we had finished editing," Friedel says. "It was late and Avrum and I started joking about ways of seeking to tie it in to that event, which was all over the papers. 'What famous heiress doesn't want this story to come out?' 'Why

doesn't the Symbionese Liberation Army want this story told?' It made us laugh, so I thought why not put it on the one-sheet, in typical misleading Hollywood fashion, not realizing in my youthful enthusiasm how offensive it might be. We only used that poster for the premiere.

The premiere of what was then still called *The Kidnap Lover* took place on 15 February, 1975, at The Great Western Music Hall theatre in Gainesville, Florida, Friedel's hometown. "I remember I ran into Lindsay Anderson, the great British director of *If...* and *O Lucky Man*, who was lecturing at the school. They had me in a long to the classes before my movie opened there making a big deal of it, like 'local boy makes good', and told him rather matter-of-factly that I had made two films in a year. He used to take many years between his films. I'm not drawing any comparison, his films are truly remarkable, and he looked at me, almost I red thinking about making two in one year and said, 'You must have a lot of pep'.

Friedel remembers the premiere screening well. "The actors flew in, klieg lights out front... they tried to make it as big a deal as possible. The print arrived by plane just hours before the opening. There was a reporter for the college newspaper there who was making himself a bit of a pest, pompous air and a bit, and I was less than gracious with him. He then wrote a scathing review in the college newspaper personally attacking me. Anyway I drove home three hundred miles south to Miami the next day, to be with my very sick father, who was dying of cancer. When I came back a few days later and drove by the theatre I was shocked to see that the movie was no longer playing there. Apparently it had died at the box office amidst all the hoopla. It was quite humiliating. What made it even worse was that making the film kept me away from my father during the last few months of his life and I had dedicated it to him, so I felt doubly bad. I found out that he had cancer just when we were about to start shooting, and he insisted I stay and finish the movie. I remember one week we didn't have the money and called my father and he sent me a check for \$5,000 to keep it going. He was a very special man." Friedel's father died two months after the film opened. "Before he died I lied and told him the movie was a hit," Friedel says. "I didn't have the heart to tell him the truth."

The Charming Mr. Novak

At first, Friedel and Avrum Friedlander distributed the two films themselves, under their original titles *Lisa*, *Lisa and The Kidnap Lover*, scoring play dates in North and South Carolina. Two years later, hoping for wider distribution, they struck a deal with exploitation distributor Harry Novak and his company Box Office International. Dazzled by Novak's personal charm, they accepted his offer, a decision Friedel rues to this day.

When Harry Novak took the films to distribute he paid \$5,000 up front, then struck many prints and started playing them all over the country. Whenever he showed me a box office statement, it appeared that the more he played the movies and the more money he made, the more money he claimed I owed him. I was just out of college and was totally unaware of the duplicitous practice of many distributors. Two sets of books - pretty common, especially on the low end of the scale like Harry. When I met a lawyer who after him, he declared bankruptcy.

and transferred the films to another company and took the negative from the lab and hid it. I was told by my lawyer that ever getting a penny from such a practiced con man would be nearly impossible, and would be financially prohibitive. He would just hide in the court system (and the sewers, for years). He's been sued many times before. I was advised to just get on with life and forget it. My partner Irwin who put up most of the money bore the brunt of the financial loss. His fortunes turned at his time and he was forced to move out of his large luxurious home into a smaller more modest one. The move was very hard on his beautiful wife Peggy, a successful Southern belle in the Scarlett O'Hara tradition. She became very depressed and eventually shot and killed herself. I have often thought that the money from the films if returned honestly would have kept them in their better home, and possibly this tragedy might have been averted. I'll never know. But it didn't stop there. Irwin's beautiful young daughter Jill was so distraught over Peggy's death that she attempted to take her own life. She shot herself in the throat, severing her spine, and remained paralyzed in a wheelchair. It was totally devastating. There were times I was so filled with rage I wanted to kill Novak."

The Later Films

The death of Friedel's father after *Kidnapped Coed* was completed meant he was obliged to take time away from the industry for a while to look after his mother and run the family business in Florida. "While I was there I wrote a script called *Dead Run* about two world-class serial killers and used it (and my two movies) to get a 'big time agent' in New York," he recounts. "I decided to shoot for a moon. My agent wrote a letter to the head of Universal Studios accompanying my script for *Dead Run* saying she thought I could be the next Steven Spielberg - pretty heady stuff for a young director. *Dead Run* never got made and I spent a few years trying to raise money to direct some even more ambitious projects. For my adaptation of *Josh Chatterton's Lover* I actually had location scouts working in England when the financing fell through. I also spent some time writing and trying to raise money for *The Deed*, a movie about two young Israeli freedom fighters who helped create the state of Israel. (It's based on a book by Gerold Frank, the man who wrote *The Boston Stranger*). In the eighties I got interested in making smaller, more personal movies, which I hoped to fund by writing and producing movie trailers for the studios. I probably worked on over a hundred movie campaigns: *Pretty Woman*, *War of the Roses*, *Rain Man*, *Die Harder*, etc. I also worked on TV spots for some popular American TV shows: *The X-Files*, *Cops*, *American Most Wanted*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Murphy Brown*, etc. It was a bit schizophrenic, sort of like living in the belly of the beast. Writing personal, un-Hollywood-like movie scripts while earning a living promoting big-budget fare, and television, which I never even watched. Along the way I wrote and starred in a play in Hollywood, called *Lost in the Movies*, about a mental patient who can only talk in movie dialogue. (I'll be doing that as a film in the next few years). I collaborated with some other writers on material that was never produced: a studio picture called *Mama's Boys*, about two brothers who discover their father has a secret life as a successful criminal, and *Plots*, a murder

mystery set in the world of funeral homes. I also wrote a book called *The Complete Book of Hugs* (comic-romantic fare inspired by my beautiful wife Jill, an actress-singer who has performed with Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Bob Hope, Tina Turner, and appeared on TV's *Happy Days*). It has been published in ten countries including Great Britain. I spent some time doing stand-up comedy. More pertinently, I wrote a number of personal scripts dealing with subjects such as my father's death, and my mother's mental illness, that it appears I'll finally get to make due to the inexpensiveness of digital video."

In 1999, Friedel was brooding over the fate of his first two movies when he decided to act on an idea that had first struck him back in 1980: "I came up with an idea to create an original movie by combining the two *Axe* and *Kidnapped Coed* - into one. Because Jack was the lead in both, I came up with a story about two identical twins who were separated at birth and never meet. But thirty-five years later a most to the day, they both go on violent killing sprees within a few miles of each other. I called it *Bloody Brothers*. I did a rough cut in about a day and thinking it was probably a crazy idea - and that I'd actually get sued for releasing my own movies - I pretty much set it aside and forgot about it. Well a number of years later my best friend is teaching a college film course and for a lark shows the class the rough cut of *Bloody Brothers*... And they loved it. I finished re-cutting it and I know this sounds crazy - it's actually a better movie than either of the other two, which were very slow and drawn out because I had to use every foot of film I shot. To make matters worse in the debacle with Novak, I failed to copyright my own films (remember I was a small-town boy just out of college who didn't know nothing) so they have been copyrighted by a number of people who have been selling them all over the world without paying me a penny. So now I will finally own a bigger and better version of my own movies and at long last, God willing, get paid for it. The new movie actually looks like a period piece that could have been shot today. It will be interesting to see what happens. A lot of distributors want to see it. And I'd like to sell it to TV and video in Europe. All the money I make will go into my next movie. I'm intrigued as to how the story of a filmmaker who has his movies stolen but reinvents them to finally get the last laugh on a crooked distributor will play. So much of *Axe* and *Kidnapped Coed* was driven by not having enough footage to make a full length feature film, thereby using every bit of film but the slates and playing every scene on and on *ad nauseum*, that they are now a most impossible for me to watch without pain (or pain killers...) So when the opportunity came along to finally cut out some of the stuff that I find unwatchable, as well as to correct a long standing injustice, it was impossible to pass up."

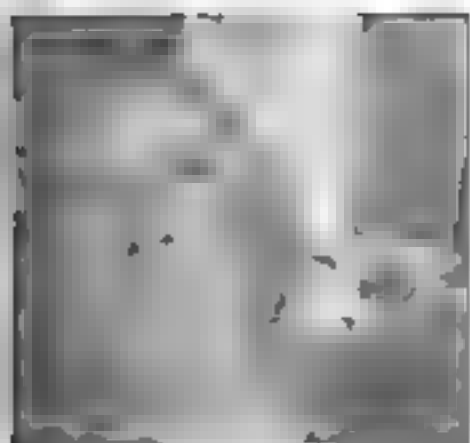
The scene originally cut by Novak where Leslie wakes to see Jack on the beach praying at sunrise has been re-related to the cut of *Bloody Brothers*. Friedel always missed it, saying, "I felt it was important, to explain her change of heart towards him, but Novak cut it out without my knowing. Unfortunately the only source for this scene was an old 3/4 inch tape, so the poor quality of it you'll see in *Bloody Brothers* captures only a fraction of the visual beauty of the original."

Having made a cut of *Bloody Brothers*, Friedel turned his attention to a new project. In 2001, whilst working as

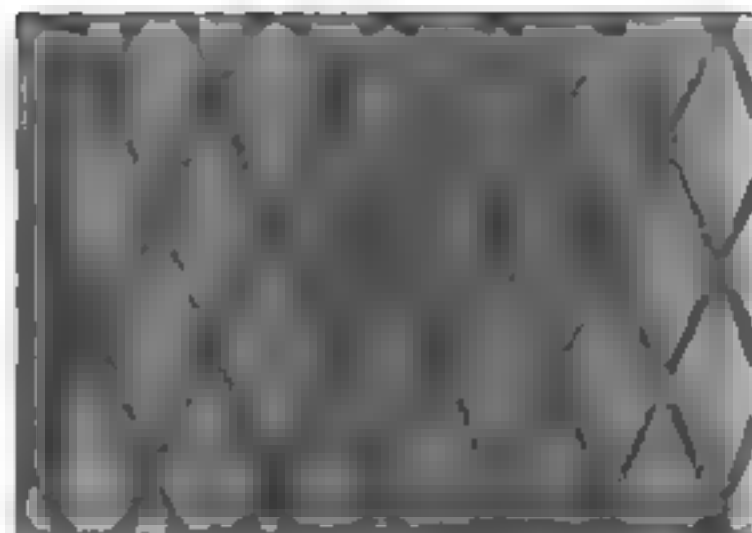


The face of a maniac? Patrick David Bradley in Friedel's latest movie *Squish* (2001)





an acting teacher at the Angels Gate Cinema Center in San Pedro, California, Friedel saw an opportunity to launch his third feature film. The Angels Gate is an artists' enclave at a converted military base, and due to its practice of holding rents down low, it has become a haven for painters, sculptors, photographers and filmmakers. Friedel used the facility as a base for a 16mm feature film called *My Next Funeral*, a black comedy about a destitute, depressive comedian (played by Friedel himself) who decides to take his own life. However, oblivion proves just as elusive as stardom. "The story was probably inspired by Beth Moore's

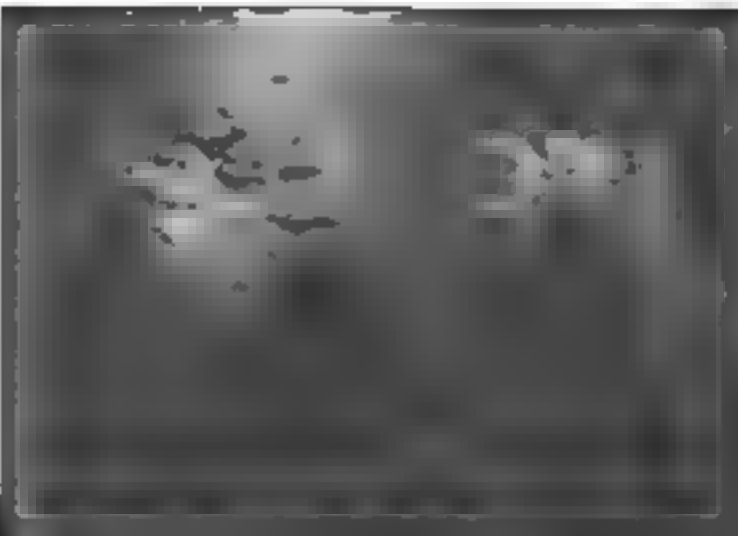


suicide," Friedel says. "and a cousin of mine who killed herself. A beautiful twenty-three-year-old named Linda, who was actually a twin. I was always haunted by the idea that if someone somehow had just managed to get through to them before they did it, they might actually have decided to live. I like the Voltaire quote which I use

"A man who kills himself today, would have wanted to live, if he had only waited a week." A serious subject that I thought could be best approached comedically. Because I hadn't made a movie in a long time, I was eager to try anything and everything. I wrote the script while working at Fox Television, producing spots for *America's Most Wanted*, and I thought I'd lighten the load by writing as many jokes as I could think of. It turned out to be one of the most logistically complicated low-budget movies ever. Truly head spinning. Over a hundred and fifty actors, fifty locations, music numbers and the shooting was completed for \$25,000. (When I finished it came to three times that, all out of my own pocket and on credit cards.) It took me a while to find a production manager who even wanted to work on it, because they all thought it was impossible to make for the money I had. I play the lead and am in every scene so the directing was interesting. I'm presently looking for a distributor for it.

Friedel continues to work on new stories, turning these days to the increasingly sophisticated possibilities of video technology. A script called *A Dog's Life* is one possible future project. "At this point it's a bit up in the air. I haven't found a way to approach the subject that's not hopelessly grim and off putting. It's a drama about the relationship between a homeless deaf mute and a dog he finds on the streets. The drama unfolds when the dog is put into a city pound where he'll be put down, and the city refuses to give the dog back to him because he's homeless. It's a powerful story that I hope brings some attention to the rather bleak treatment given to both homeless people and animals in this country."

Friedel is still only in his fifties, so it's more than likely he will direct another production some time soon. The structure of the film industry may have changed so that films like *Axe* are no longer get made, but Friedel is certainly not a quitter. I look forward to seeing his next film, whatever the medium. Meanwhile, we have *Axe* and *Kidnapped Coed* to remind us just how fertile the American independent cinema could be, back in the days when the 'exploitation' film industry ran its own merry way, separate and apart from the mainstream pantheon of greats, a pantheon to which Friedel definitely belongs.



Wet Off the Press...

Nightmare USA was nearing completion, Frederick Friedel sent me a rough cut of his latest film, a thirty-five minute short marking his long-delayed return to the horror genre. So what would it be – another of his digressive, earnestness into melancholia? A downbeat character study? The film in question is *Squish*, the moving story of a man escaped mental patient who hides out in a room full of huge industrial presses!

We shouldn't be so surprised that Friedel has turned to black comedy this time. After the Woody Allen-ish humour of *My Next Funeral*, and the problems of *A Dog's Life* into shape ("I haven't found a way to touch the subject that's not hopelessly grim and off-putting" he says), Friedel clearly has a need to find an up-counter his downbeat preoccupations. And once you adjust the idea of a film perhaps more in the mould of Frank Titterton or Stuart Gordon, Friedel's habitual tendency for the underdog is readily apparent.

Following synopsis is kindly provided by the filmmaker: *A deranged mental patient escapes from the hospital after brutally murdering a security guard. He takes refuge in a deserted factory with heavy industrial presses, and soon becomes obsessed with a beautiful young girl. When Beauty rejects the Beast, he embarks on a killing spree. He turns the factory into a chamber of horrors, where death is accompanied by candlelight screenings, and punctuated by the sound of squish. The manhunt begins. Can he be stopped before his hunt becomes a tidal wave.*

In the demeanor of "the patient" (Patrick David Bradley) is the far from undercurrents in which the film's previous characters so often swam. *Squish* is not, and foremost a comedy horror film. Friedel derives his humour from the means by which the tormented mental patient makes his escape. When a drunken security guard comes to his cell to torment him, dressed in blonde wig and women's clothing, "I makes me look a little heavy?" – the man murders his tormentor and adopts the female persona as a disguise. Later, while tottering past a factory, "I makes me look a little heavy?" – he's bizarrely on a job ("Have you ever thought of a career in security?") by a boss determined to win a wager with a colleague (the latter played by Friedel himself). And when the madman takes to a backstreet red-light area, it's the john who molested his dream-girl (a ear-ole student forced into prostitution by her

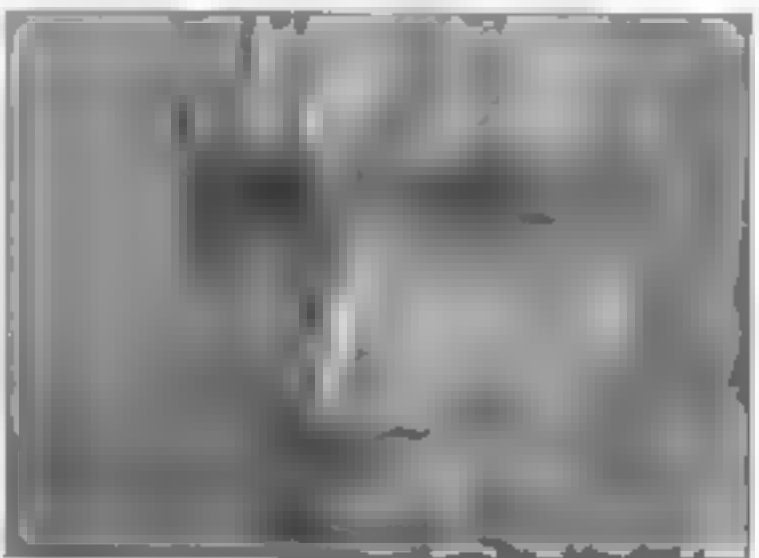
debt-ridden boyfriend) he again finds the dress, wig and heels invaluable. Meanwhile, in a broader comedy vein, the murdered guard's twin brother, a cop, suffers the jibes of colleagues who find it hilarious that the dead man was found wearing spandex-crotch pink knickers, fish-net stockings and a wonder-girdle. "The nerve of that fuckin' Tony – drawing a bro and panties on the chalk outline of my brother's body!" he exclaims.

On the downside, *Squish* suffers from a couple of shaky zooms and some even shakier performances. In particular the psychiatric doctor (Otto Brezina) whose line readings inexorably recall Bela Lugosi in *Glen Or Glenda* (1953). Brianna Walker also struggles to make much of innocent under-age Anna (and while beautiful she looks no older than fourteen). Fortunately the cops (Joe Kamm and John C. Macneil) and Anna's seafish boyfriend (Friedel) are up-an-coming horror star Jared Cohn, a protégé of prolific genre studio The Asylum) take up the slack, giving performances that would work just fine in a more expensive exploitation movie.

Squish is an experiment to shoot a movie on Mini DV for under \$5 (NO," Friedel explains "it was shot mostly on weekends with mainly non-actors and amateur crew. Pretty much a rake and a camera. Its origin? A friend has a shop with heavy industrial presses. Another has a face like 'death'. I thought, 'If I put the two together it might be a movie. I wrote the script in about the time it takes to cook a roast'."

Once again, Friedel is building his work from locations and faces rather than story-telling notions, a method that recalls his Carolina movies. One major difference this time is gore, or at least it will be, once the film is completed. The version I've seen is extremely bloody but lacking in grisly aftermath shots. Friedel explains: "It's still being edited. There are black holes shots missing. Most of the killing, terror, and gore scenes are only 25% filled in. The sound hasn't been fixed and is unbelievably bad. There is no music, and sound effects yet, no colour correction, no titles/credits, and the last scene, which twists the story in a different direction, is missing." Asked about the film's modest running time, Friedel says, "It just played better shorter. And with some of the non-actor performances, less was definitely more."

Made for \$5,000 it may be, but *Squish* is a short with commercial DVD potential, so let's hope we see a commercial version. Perhaps, with a second and third film, *Squish* it, this could even be the birth of Friedel's first portmanteau horror movie.



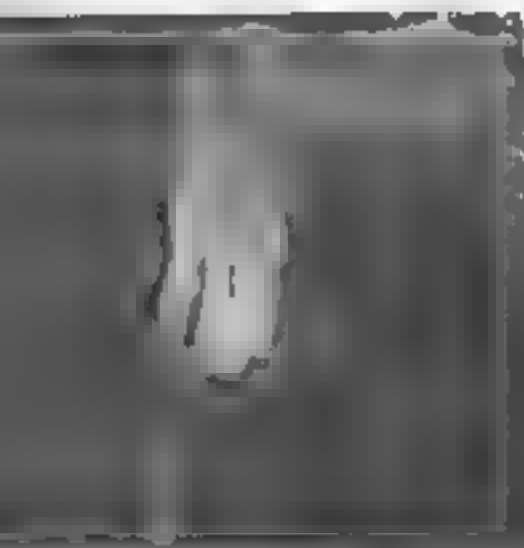
Jack Canon's likeable Coed (pictured) and Bradley share the screen. Bloody Brothers



in a movie called Squish, he with huge industrial presses. It's a film.



Will true love go Squish? Patrick David Bradley



me far from Squish

gets My Next Funeral



Postscript

It is not often that a film critic gets the chance to add a line to one of his favourite movies, especially when it's over thirty years old. The opportunity arose for me, however, whilst researching this chapter. During our correspondence, Frederick kindly sent me a cut of *Bloody Brothers*, asking for my opinion. I watched it with my friend Julian Grange. I had seen neither of the two earlier films from which it was derived. Knowing that *Bloody Brothers* would need to work as a stand alone movie, I figured a combination of my perspective and Julian's would be useful feedback. As it turned out, we both enjoyed the film. However, we agreed that the ending was a problem, because it was technically impossible for the two Jack Canons to meet, the film lacked a final payoff, although it was something the intercutting seemed to promise: events appeared to be heading for convergence as the film progressed, with captions revealing that the two brothers were getting closer and closer geographically. The original *Bloody Brothers* cut ended with Eddie and Sandra from *Kidnapped Coed* driving together, and Steele from *Dead in the Farmhouse*.

I suggested that one way to make the storylines cross would be to add a radio news report over the final shot of Eddie and Sandra driving away, to the effect that Steele's body has been found at the farmhouse, and eye-witness reports have also identified him as the person responsible for the kidnapping of Sandra Morely, with Sandra declared missing presumed dead. Thus, the murderous Steele is blamed for Eddie's crime and Sandra and Eddie can head off together with the ransom money, safe in the knowledge that the police have attributed Eddie's crime to his evil twin.

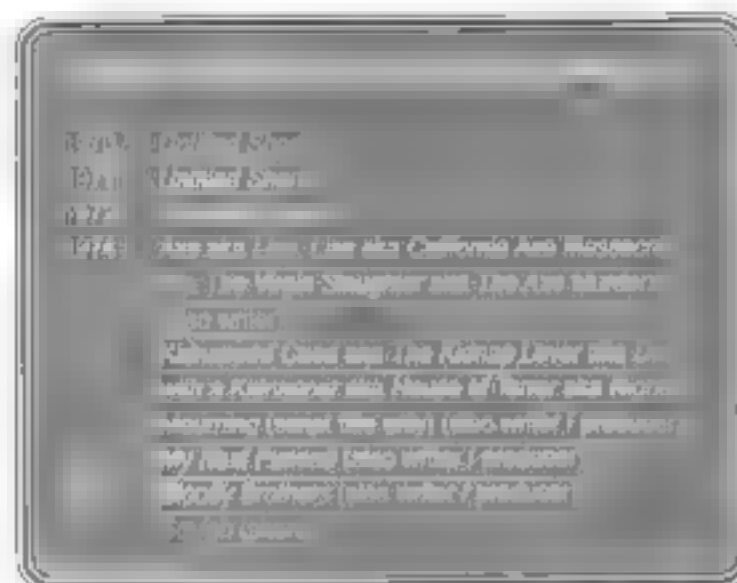
Friedel approved of the idea, saying 'it would cost nothing to do and is truly in the spirit of low-budget movie-making'. The final cut of *Bloody Brothers* now has the extra line dubbed over the requisite shot.

1 Godwin directed a documentary about the University of Illinois, called *The Maple Tower* (1966).

2 Leacock was a cinematographer and partner in the Leacock-Pennebaker company who made *Don't Look Back* (1967) and *Monterey Pop* (1968).

3 Distributed by Variety Film Inc., the company who handled Peter Jackson's *The Badly Shap* and the aforementioned Southern drive in his *Prozac Nation*, Variety also handled such explosive sex-leech hybrids as Shamus Costello's *Portrait Entry* (1972) and Aries De Renzy's *Femmes de Sade* (1976), and circulated Doris Wishman's extraordinary sex-change saga *Let Me Die a Woman* (1978).

4 A brand of car.



Kidnapped Coed
Leslie Rivers

Date with a ..



THE DEADLY SPAWN

EATING MACHINE



It Came from New Jersey!

Douglas McKeown on *The Deadly Spawn*

The Deadly Spawn (1982)

When a meteorite lands near a sleepy New Jersey village, tiny sithering creatures with fearsome teeth emerge and infest the locality. Next morning, thirteen-year-old Charles (Charles Haidbrandt) wanders down to the cellar of his family's hillside home and discovers gruesome evidence that his parents have been eaten by the Spawn now swarming the waterlogged basement. Charles must devise a way to destroy the creatures, which are growing at frightening speed. The solution is to save his older brother Pete (Tom De Franco), and Pete's friends Frankie (Richard Lee Carter), Ellen (Jean Taffer) and Kathy (Karen Tighe), from similarly grisly fate. A tall order for a thirteen-year-old, perhaps an encyclopaedic knowledge of monster movies will prove useful. ?

If a cynic was to give a 'high-concept' summary of *The Deadly Spawn*, it would sound like any of a multitude of gory horrors – monsters, alien invasion, eyes eaten, friends chased, etc., etc. But it's actually one of the most enjoyable and exciting low-budget horror films of its day. Let's be clear about one thing: the worst a horror movie can be is dull. *The Deadly Spawn* may be cheaply made and essentially frivolous but it has a brisk pace, gruesome gore, and lots of pleasing incidental detail.

It is a funny, gripping and atmospheric piece of work that puts many a monster flick of big studio fame in the shade.

A brief prologue showing the deaths of a couple of unwary campers is simply workmanlike, but the next few scenes draw us compellingly under the film's spell. Director Douglas McKeown takes time to introduce an ordinary household whose fate will be the focus of the story. The early scenes are so evocative and plausible you find, to your surprise, that you're not merely waiting for a Spawn to attack – with most low-budget monster movies, all you really want to see is teeth and flesh wounds, everything else is an irritant. Not so here. It's not about over-doing it or being pointlessly arty. McKeown captures the gentle, sleepy domesticity of a Sunday as everyone just eases their way into the day. The music has a dreamy calm-before-the-storm

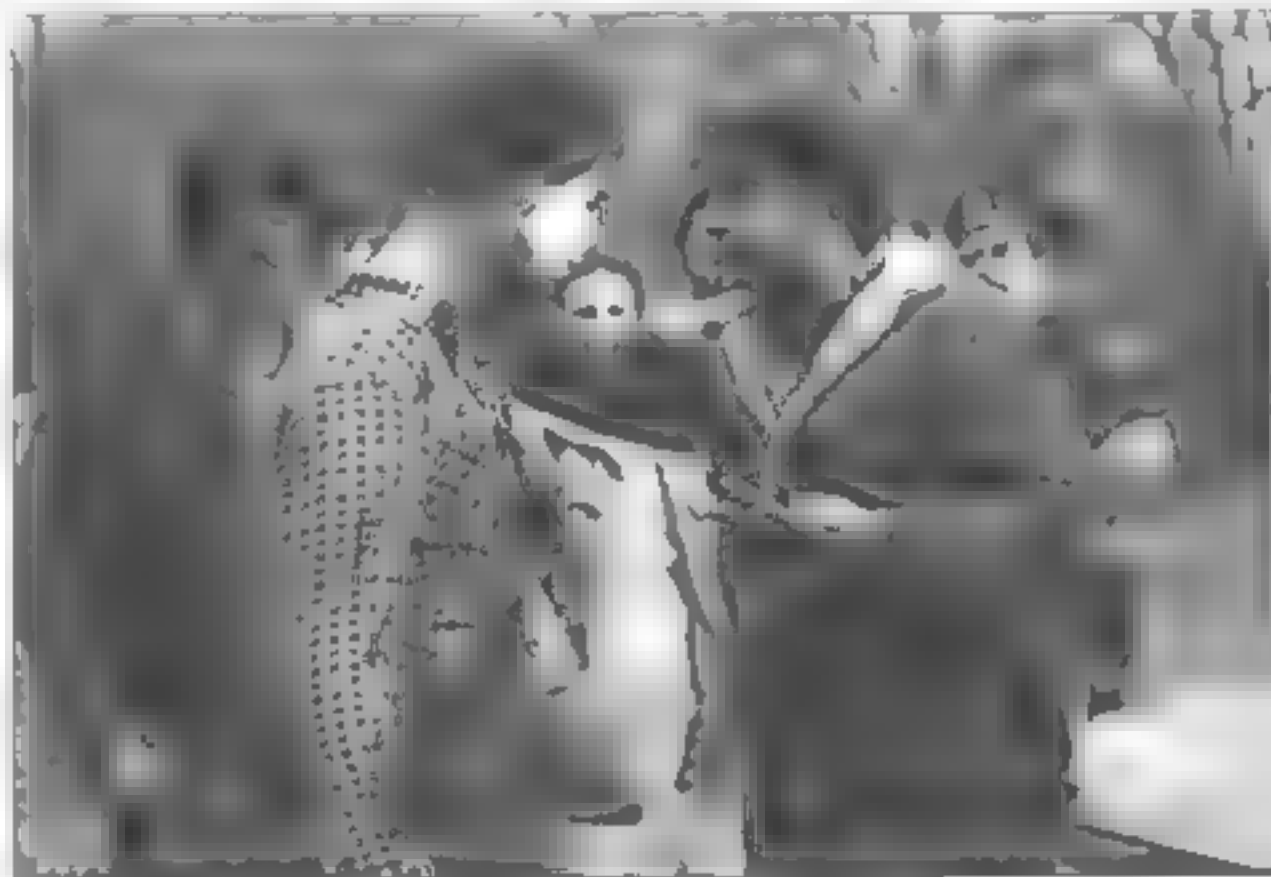
feel. The acting is realistically low key. When a beast beats down on the windows, you would almost forgive the characters if they opted to deny us the usual screaming and bleeding and instead hopped back into bed like real people for another forty winks.

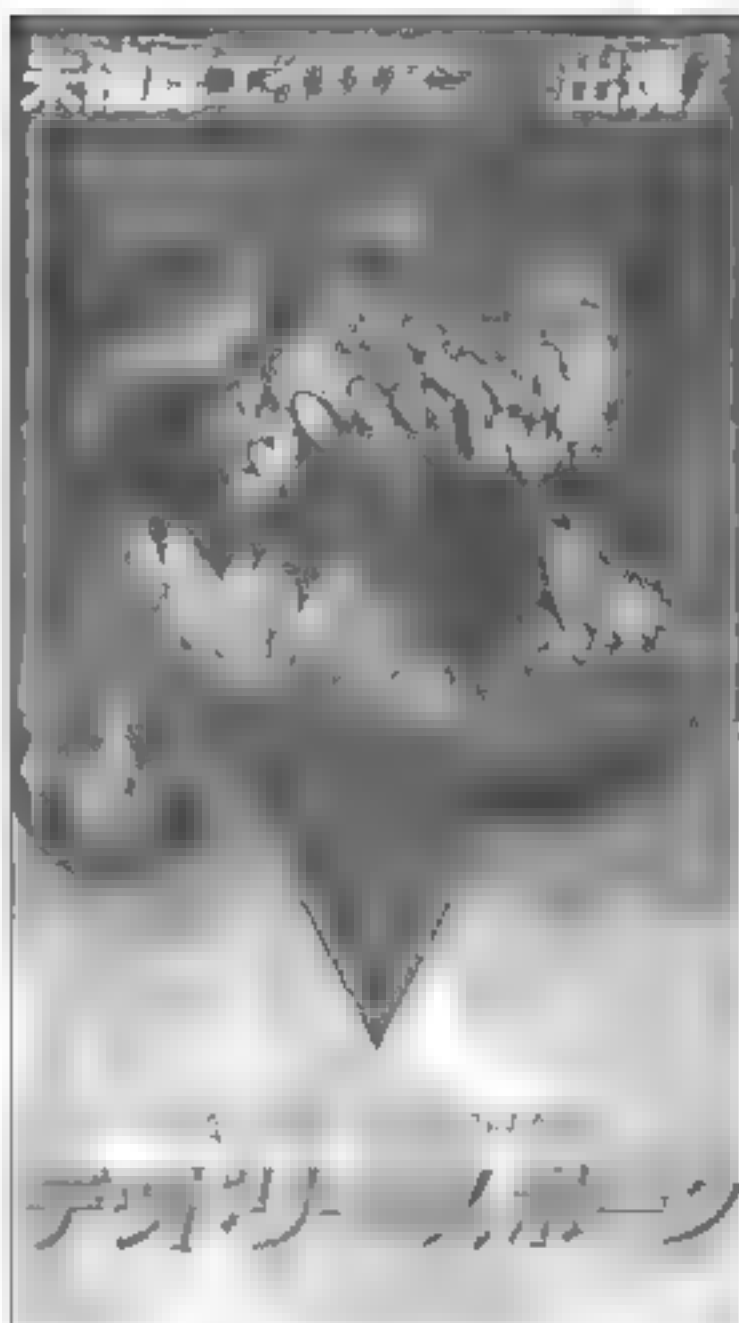
But this is a horror film, and such low-key laziness is not an option. Bloodthirsty sceptics can rest assured that the laid-back parents soon lose their happy thoughts after a trip to the cellar, and the mayhem proliferates (in step with good characterisation) from thereon.

The Deadly Spawn reminds me of another great American horror movie. Dan Conkare's *Phantasm*: both films focus on believable, non-chippy teenage protagonists forced to deal with an attack on their families, presented within a fantastical framework. *The Deadly Spawn*, like *Phantasm*, is liberally packed with highly inventive special effects. And both are mood-pieces, the prevailing emotional ambience being a blend of humour, horror and melancholy.

The Spawn: Q:

McKeown applies some of his own ideas to cast member Regan. The background is a mix of





But enough of the film's subtleties. What about the monsters? Well, they're *fantastic*—a triumph of low-budget dedication and design. The *Spawn* monster attacks are just priceless, and even the less successful prosthetics make up inchutzpah what they lack in technical polish. Of all the effects in the movie, I'm always most startled by the most realistic early stages of the *Spawn*, skittering around like mutated mudskippers in the flooded cellar. The more advanced *Spawn* inspire a mixture of repulsion and hilarity; they even have a bizarre sort of cuteness, their cartoonish facial expressions exuding a Tex Avery pleasure in going about their gory business. By the time these critters have grown into man-eating multi-headed giants the size of cattle they're riotously impressive, sure to start the hearts of even the most jaded fans. John Dods, who designed these magnificently angry crimson creatures, their gaping mouths packed with teeth sprouting from swollen gums and dripping with a red macous, gives us one of the most memorable screen nasties ever. I've applauded the film's other qualities but let's not mince words—this is one hell of a payday for monster fans. In many ways *The Death of Sauron* is the apotheosis of the low-budget monster flick (instead of a cute but obvious man-in-a-suit (*Spawn of the Slithis*, *The Mipitax Monster*, *Bog*), here we have a rude, aggressive, dementedly phallic grungily vaginal creation proliferating through several differently designed and executed—*all of them dangerous*—executed with dedication by John Dods and given the utmost impact by McKeown. It's obvious that the

inspiration came from Ray Scott and H.R. Giger's *Alien*. At where Scott and Giger had vast resources, McKeown and Dods carved their niche in horror heaven with a thousandth of the budget. If you have any love for the craft of monster-making, you can't fail to be dazzled.

But then, everything works well here. The young cast hold the story together admirably—there's nothing phoney about their performances, even when they have to react in *extremis*. They may have been new to the screen, but they never feel clumsy or corny. The scene where Peter (Tom De Franco) refuses to accept that his cherished world of science and logic has been breached by an *impossible* invader is well acted and completely plausible within the generic context of the film. Thirteen-year-old Charles Hildebrandt, in the pivotal role of a clued-in horror fan, never hits a false note, and—a genuine rarity with child stars—never has you rooting for his death. The script foregrounds his interest in horror films, and in a clever cannily written exchange, McKeown has him answering questions from a psychiatrist-medic about the effect of scary movies, thus shooting down the criticisms parents often raise when they choose to stop their children reading horror comics, or watching horror films on TV. It's all done without ostentation, revealing the child's no-nonsense distinction between fantasy and reality, and then bolstering his by showing that he's actually more resourceful, thanks to his passion for horror. Talk about understanding your audience: by cocking a snook at oppressive pleasure-denying parents, McKeown's script is guaranteed to strike a ready spark with viewers! This genre-referential approach proved quite prescient, too: the self-aware use of movie lore was still infrequent in horror films of the time. McKeown's 'postmodern' appeal to fan sensibilities easily pre-dates the 'horror-irony' handwagon of the 1990s and has the added virtue of offering a casual, playful setting for such ideas.

All horror films need their set pieces, and McKeown delivers in spades with a priceless scene in which the *Spawn* chow down on the guests at a housewives' vegetarian lunch. What gives it that extra bite (I forgive me) is that we're not really used to seeing middle-aged women prey to gory monster attacks. There's something both funny and disturbing about it. I was reminded of David Cronenberg's *Shivers*—repellent slug-like monsters attacking the elderly in scenes that vibrate with both horror and hilarity. If all the movie had to offer was this one scene it would still be worth your money.

There are problems, of course. Charles Hildebrandt does his best to sell the scenes in the cellar, but they're dragged out far too much, seeming to strand the boy in a temporal limbo and interfering with the time-scale of the story. He's still down there after the mayhem at the vegetarian luncheon, which jars because in screen terms we've been occupied for quite a long time with it, not to mention the plight of Pete and his friends. On the plus side, though, these extended scenes (explained in the interview with Doug McKeown) do give us lots of lingering shots of the various *Spawn*: one caught in a mousetrap, another nibbling at a severed head, etc. Quibbles aside, the film's overwhelming drive and energy push the narrative beyond the tripicker's tweezers. If you're a parent who hasn't forgotten the thrill of being a childhood horror fan, how about leaving a DVD of this movie lying around for your children to find? I bet even the seen-it-all kids of today would get a kick from this spirited genre treasure.



For the young Douglas, it seemed natural to want to learn how the images onscreen were created, but his interest did not meet with parental encouragement. "I always wanted to make movies, from the first time I saw one, I believe. And I was an enormously exuberant and talented child. But I was discouraged in such dreams by my father and to a lesser extent by my mother. In a thousand ways they utterly convinced me that it was not possible for me to consider working in motion pictures because it was not a real career you could go to school for and make money at, or because it cost too much, or because I had no connections, without which nobody got anywhere. What did I think I was, after all, talented?" Discouragement, irrational & based, as discouragement always is, was practically a way of life with my father.

Nevertheless, by the time he was sixteen, a teenage McKeown had made quite a name for himself in the locality. "I'd spent seven or eight years creating realistic monster make-ups, putting on shows, painting huge frightening murals in downtown store fronts for Halloween, etc. I was pretty damned inventive. I read in *Famous Monsters* for example that Lon Chaney, Sr. had employed mortician's wax for both Quasimodo and Erik, the Phantom, so I got on a bus to New Brunswick and found the stuff in an old theatrical shop, and melted it down with modern nose putty to arrive at the perfect blend, more malleable than the putty alone but not as impossibly sticky. From age nine, I was sneaking out at night in my various guises and by twelve I had already terrorized the children in whole neighbourhoods who did not know my real identity. These appearances got quite elaborate!"



McKeown's youth

The Monster of Metuchen

My earliest memories of movies are from Saturday matinees at the Forum Theatre in Metuchen," he recalls. "I used to run 'old' movies for kids. I remember the Venusianler 'Tarzan' pictures and a host of sci-fi and horror such as *Forbidden Planet*, *Tarantula*, *Them*, *The Thing*, *It Came from Outer Space*, *It's The Terror from Beyond Space*, *It Conquered the World*, and so forth etc etc. I was completely in love with early B-movies, like *The Beast from 20 000 Fathoms* and *20 Miles to Earth*. I don't care much for colour movies which I felt were garish and more suitable for children's musicals than terrifying monsters. Besides, the movies I liked were mostly bloodless and not gory, until the 60s arrived and everything changed. I remember the first run of *The Curse of Frankenstein*, when my mother eagerly took me to, talking all the while about how scary monster Frankenstein was, and how my high-school class had met Boris Karloff backstage at *Old Lace* on Broadway. Then, with the credits of the Hammer film, I heard her whisper "remember this being in colour." Of course, I remember she was disappointed as it dawned on her that it was a fake but I was terribly excited. Christopher Lee's make-up I remember well, and the horrible pain of being tied together without anaesthesia. I went home and did the make-up as I remembered it. Later, I would learn from the magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland* that it was possible. And then I began a brief career of posing as all the monsters, every one. But it is very important to note that my most vivid memories came not from theatres but from television. In the mid 60s BC and local stations realized they had cheap programming in some of the studios, old movie prints would rent for a song. So it was *King Kong* on Channel 13, *War Movie* on Channel 11 and the horrors of the early thirties and the forties like *The Night Show* and later on *Chiller Theatre*, which influenced me.





This early interest in film received its first practical boost when a photographer uncle persuaded McKewen's parents to go halves with him on buying the boy a Bolex movie camera. "It was a Bolex 8mm," McKewen says. "Only a photographer would know that the Bolex was equipped with the single-frame exposure capacity, what I needed to shoot a dinosaur movie." As usual, his obsession with horror and sci-fi could make the transition from theatrical scares to moving images. The theme of his first film experiment, shot in standard-8 in 1964, followed in the footsteps of the father of the *ciné-fantastique*, Georges Méliès: a rocket on the surface of the moon, recreated in McKewen's basement. "My second film was of a Tyrannosaurus rex crashing through a forest," he continues, "the prehistoric tree was a frozen broccoli stalk that gradually melted under the lights and looked like a time-lapse decay from *The Time Machine* when projected. I remember laboriously moving the wire-and-latex dinosaur model I had made through the miniature set, while my mother, sitting there peeling potatoes in a bowl in her lap, clicked the shutter after every incremental move. My second dinosaur film was with the same model, but moving

through an improved jungle intercut with live-action footage of my youngest brother trying to escape. In the final frames he runs into a clearing, where the dinosaur overtakes and wolf's him down.

This obsession with horror continued into college. "I shot two short-form films at Emerson College, one, called *The Dinosaur* (1966), that I am still happy with, small and simple though it is, the other a lugubrious story of madness and incest called *Dear Penny* (1968). I also shot filmed sequences for a play production about the Donner party (you know, the stranded pioneers who fed into cannibalism) that our college took to the Yale University drama festival in 1967. The play starred Henry Winkler, and I guess some of the sequences with him represent his film debut. They were well done, though I was certainly no technician."

After graduating from college, McKewen suffered a disappointment when his application to study film at the prestigious UCLA Graduate School was turned down. Instead, he took a job as an editorial coordinator for ABC-TV in New York. The job included putting the commercials into episodes of *The Avengers* and *Captain the Friendly Ghost*. It was less than exciting work.

"I was frustrated and bored. I quit and went back to my family's home in New Jersey to re-group. I had no money and big student loans to pay off. I needed a job but I didn't seem to be properly trained for anything except possibly teaching, so I started as a substitute at the high school I had attended only a few years before. I embarked on a teaching 'career' because I needed a job. In half a year, I was on the faculty. I spent summers putting on musicals at a children's camp, where I created a theatre arts program.

Living in New Jersey provided little in the way of film industry opportunities but, determined not to be thrown off the scent, McKewen set up a film society at the school where he was teaching, and with the student-raised enough money to make a documentary. They won first prize in a New Jersey competition and the film was screened on public TV. "I should add that my inspiration to teach film came through a correspondence I was having with Lilian Cush," McKewen explains, "and I'm sure I was among the enthusiastic young film students in the sixties who gave her the idea to start touring with a show about her early filmmaking experiences. I believe it was those lectures that led to her book, *The Movies, M. Griffith and Me*."

Enter John Dods and Ted Bohus

In 1976 McKewen left teaching and moved back to New York. It was a period of poverty and struggle for him, working as an actor, scenic designer and theatre director. But it was through his persistence working in the theatre that one day in 1980, the opportunity to make a feature film came knocking. "I got a call from John Dods,"² He had worked for me on a couple of projects, notably Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, a spectacular production mounted in 1973. John created special visual effects for the play. He also did animation for a 'House of the Living Dead' attraction I designed at an amusement park in 1977.

I'd known him since he was in junior high school. He made effects in his family's basement on Rector Street, Metuchen. I knew his older sister from school, and she brought me over to see his set-up: model animation on a

re sophisticated scene than I had ever come up with in assessment. Let me tell you. Anyway, he said he had met a horror film buff at a convention, named Ted, and they were interested in having me join them on a low-budget film. Simple as that. They were New Jersey residents and I was now a bona fide young New York theatre type."

McKeown immediately set about writing scenes for me. I wrote the first scene in time for the auditions, and a couple of dummy scenes to express projected characters. A lot ended up in the final script. "He pauses: "Final, the never was a final script, as it turned out!" The screen story credit goes to Bohus, Dods and me, in that order, with McKeown credited as sole screenplay. When I ask about the co-writing of the story, McKeown laughs: "Now it gets funny. Chucking at the term 'co-writers'! At our first meeting I realized neither one of them had given much of a script. Some time later they weren't sure it was a low-budget sort of horror movie, like the ones we had loved in the fifties, about a space ship that's picked up. I said they would come on board to 'direct the actors,' since they were just acting. But they would a better idea. I was momentarily taken aback, but I said there was no

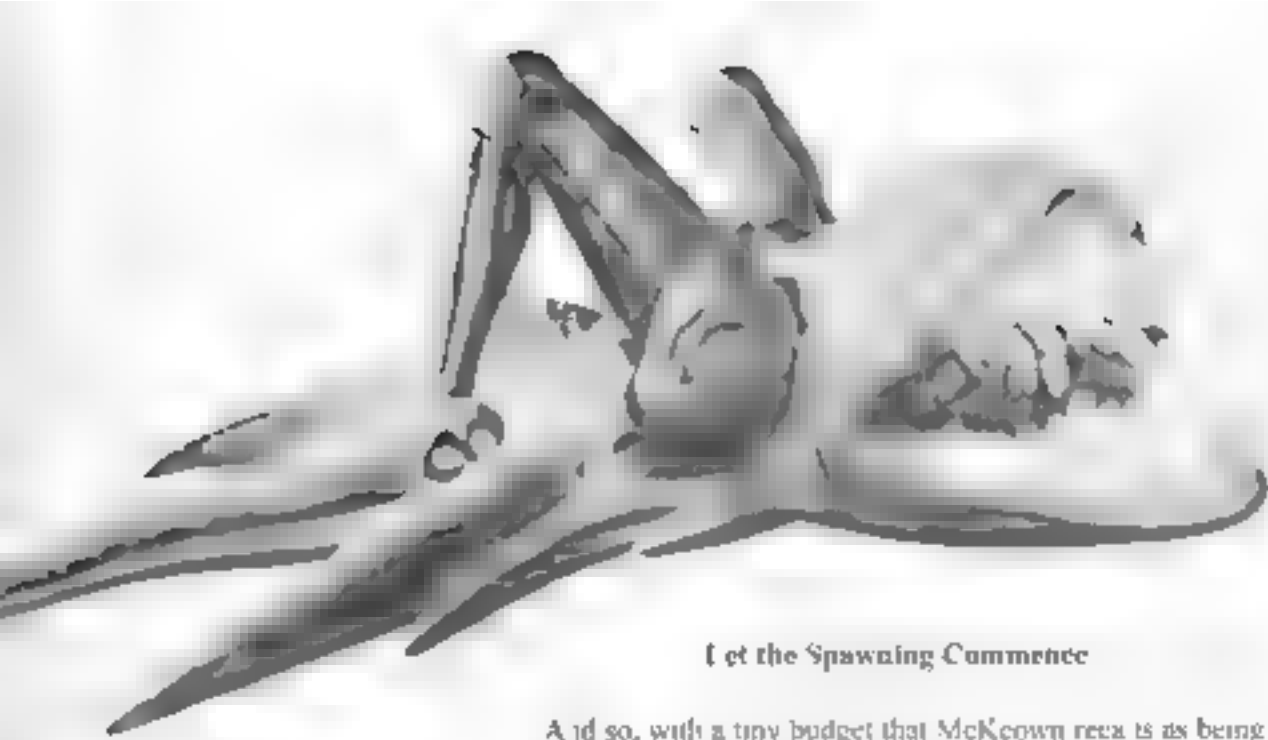
such thing, as far as I knew in the history of motion pictures, at least after 1936 or so! Well, maybe briefly in the earlier sound period, with a position called 'dialogue director', I grant you. I would only direct the movie the whole movie, and I was afraid that would have to be final. They reluctantly agreed (as I remember it, and I asked to see a script or a treatment. Ted said, 'Oh, we were going to make the words up as we went along. I thought, *what have I gotten into?*' But I really, really wanted to make a film, so I said I would direct only if I could also write the script. I figured that way I could develop a theme or two and maybe make the characters more than just functionaries to the special effects, certainly had years of experience writing dialogue for various stage projects, and of course had studied writing in college. However, I never considered the amount of work I was setting myself up for. Okay, they said, but they would have to be equal partners as far as the story was concerned. Agreed, absolutely! It was their film! And that was the way it stayed even to the final credits. At least so far as the writing was concerned. I wrote every word of the dialogue in the principal photography. The words added by other people in the film were added much later (including some boring mumbo-jumbo spoken into a walkie-talkie at the end, probably as much as a year after I had left the project, as I understand it).



McKeown at the set of *The Dead of Winter*

McKeown in a scene from *The Dead of Winter*





Let the Spawning Commence

And so, with a tiny budget that McKeown recalls as being between \$25,000 and \$28,000, the production was

October or November") and continued throughout the winter and up to early summer of 1981. "We shot basically in sequence," McKeown explains, "Without knowing how the film was going to end! And on weekends only, since almost everyone had weekday jobs. Except me. I borrowed thousands of dollars from a friend to be free from a job to write the scenes as we shot, to have the scenes ready for the actors as early in the week before we shot as possible. Sometimes they only got hand-written speeches on the Saturday morning of the shoot, driving out to New Jersey in Kathy's car—she was Ted's girl friend at the time, and she worked very hard as a general dogsbody."

McKeown set about writing a story that would be practical on the limited budget: "I suggested that we tell the story of a single family to keep it simple and cheap that we don't try to bring in the larger world of, you know, military, government, officialdom of any kind—it couldn't be remotely convincing on our budget. Besides, I didn't know about those things personally. I only knew what I had seen in the movies. Hitchcock once said he could never make a western, for example, since he would not have known the price of a loaf of bread). However, I *did* know about a middle-class New Jersey family. I also said the whole thing should take place in one twenty-four-hour period. One setting, one main action, one day. I didn't tell the other guys, but I thought Aristotle and his dramatic unities were just made for a low budget. I also decided that an easy way to tie everything together without too much effort—and since we didn't have a single person charged with production design, and also since we had a monster called a Spawn that flourished in water, would be that it should rain for the entire twenty-four hours. I envisioned the sky clearing only at the end. This would also provide general atmosphere, since the surroundings were *not* going to be a haunted castle, or anything remotely exotic."

With a setting and time-frame now chosen, McKeown turned to the characters, drawing on his own experiences as a movie-addicted youngster: "I went to work on the conflict between the two boys, as a set-up for the younger kid—a stand-in for me and my childhood. If you have already guessed as much—to be the hero later with his love of monster movies and flexible imagination, while Pete would be helplessly in denial (probably another fragment of me in that time), as well. I always assumed the kid would somehow find a way to kill the thing, probably by frying it with electricity or something. Incidental v

that's why I had him ask in the breakfast scene, 'Hey Pete how did *The Thing from Another World* get killed?' A savvy audience would know it was 'cooked' like a big carrot. I followed convention by having two sets of lovers, but neither would be lovers in terms of sexual content. I didn't want any sexual content. Ted said from the start that we had to get an 'R' rating to put his company on the map, and he said he wanted to see 'this.' I thought that would be gratuitous, not to mention embarrassing, out in New Jersey with semi-pros and amateurs and their families around. Besides, the teens I had in mind were relatively innocent. Ted did force the issue and made the poor actress who played the mother wear a see-through nightie. However, I said I thought violence—which could also earn an 'R'—would be quite natural, given the nature of the big Spawn, which we had agreed should be a fierce, unstoppable eating machine (I know we were thinking of recent films like *Alien* and *Jaws*). So I said, we will make it violent, grossly violent, we'll rip the mother's face off! It's ironic that I even thought this, since I had believed from childhood that such gore was revolting and not art. I always preferred the subtler terrors to stomach-churning horror. While I was proposing these things in the weeks before shooting started, John was having me out to his New Brunswick apartment building to behold the armature of the Mother Spawn he was creating. I was dazzled by his precise work but a little alarmed at his identification with the creature... There was a moment when I happened to be nearby as Dods was crouching next to his mother spawn making some adjustment or other. I believe he was unaware he was being overheard. He murmured to it, with a certain focus and intensity, and in a slow drawl: 'What kind of a creature are you?' I tip-toed away.

The Bernardsville house where much of the action unfolds belonged to Tim and Rita Hildebrandt, parents of the film's young star Charles Hildebrandt. McKeown explains, "Ted had hooked up with Tim at one of those F-movie conventions, and Tim had, I think, agreed to help produce the film at that time. He offered his house for the main location, as well as his considerable artistic talent and skills, and when I came up with the characters of the kid and the family, his son Charles joined the cast. They had no basement, however. The door in their kitchen opened on a stairwell of maybe five steps down to a crawl space. A tiny root cellar. So we shot up from that to the silhouette of Harb calling 'Sam, Sam?' but the reverse angle and all the basement footage (as I was shot at John Dods's apartment building down in New Brunswick, he leased it as his workshop and studio, so it would now double as our movie family's huge basement. Pete's bedroom interior was in another house entirely: it was John Dods's actual childhood bedroom on Rector Street in Metuchen. The vegetarian luncheon interior was the house Ted Bohus shared with his parents in, I think, Hoboken, New Jersey."

The first scene to go before the camera was the prologue, in which two doomed campers meet the Spawn (off-camera). "I think it was Dods who later re-shot most of this and made it rather flat and true, I'm afraid," McKeown asserts. "Today, I think he might half agree with me. In the original as I shot it, the guy attacked in the doesn't just do a bloody hand-grasping thing, as the camera tracks in to the shaking tent, instead, he suddenly gets flung out head-first and shredded and bloody and then wrenched back inside at high speed to be consumed with



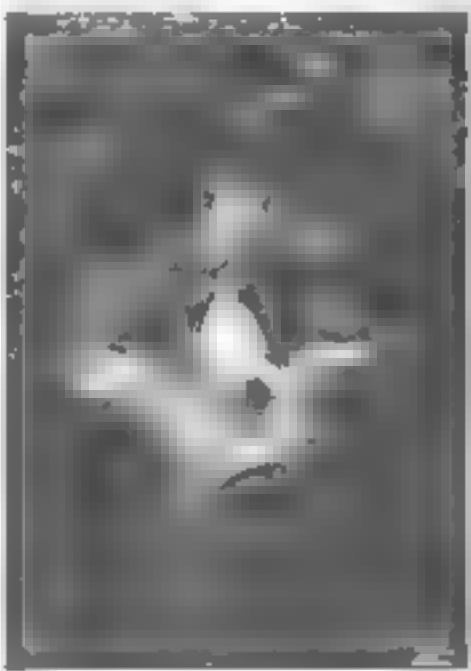
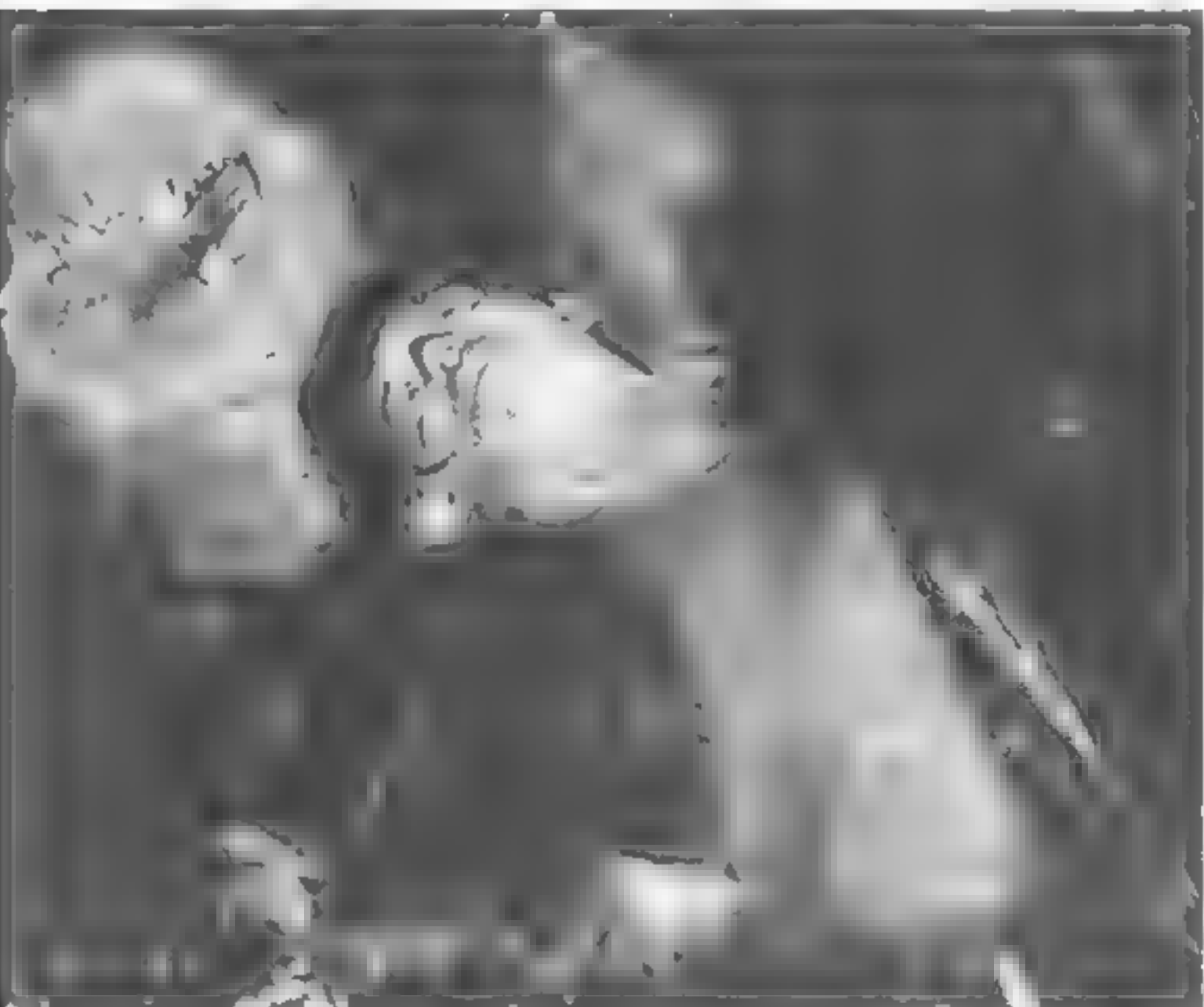
it violence. I thought the rushes looked great, leaving what the thing looked like to the imagination, yet shik ng he tent so unnaturally and all, but Dods later re-shot the scene. I don't know why. Maybe he just wanted to be a color. But the unintentional jump cut, the silly bloody and reaching out, these I would never have done. Two of the men remain show the campers, eventually lying upon the burning ground surrounding the creature. They are too dimly lighted, but I still like the tenor and excitement in them.

I tell McKeown that I particularly admire the early scenes of the film for their domestic sleepiness and casurable melancholy. "Thanks, I agree. And I was so out of the time of trying to get a most exactly what I wanted. It's very pleasing to know you felt that I tried to pull the spectators in to the ordinariness of life. I hope if I could convince them of that, the 'impossible' would become believable.

The rain outside during these scenes plays a big part in establishing mood, although it was by no means easy to make it work. "The rain was a big headache, though I think it was a good idea to have it. Not only did we always have to spare a crew member to stand out of camera range in a garden hose, and we had precious few crew members to spare — they were basically three or four students and one or two local teenagers. I remember the rain machine or some device that year. I think it was enough to the point where we had to believe it or not, it never rained, but we had an emergency town ordinance against using garden

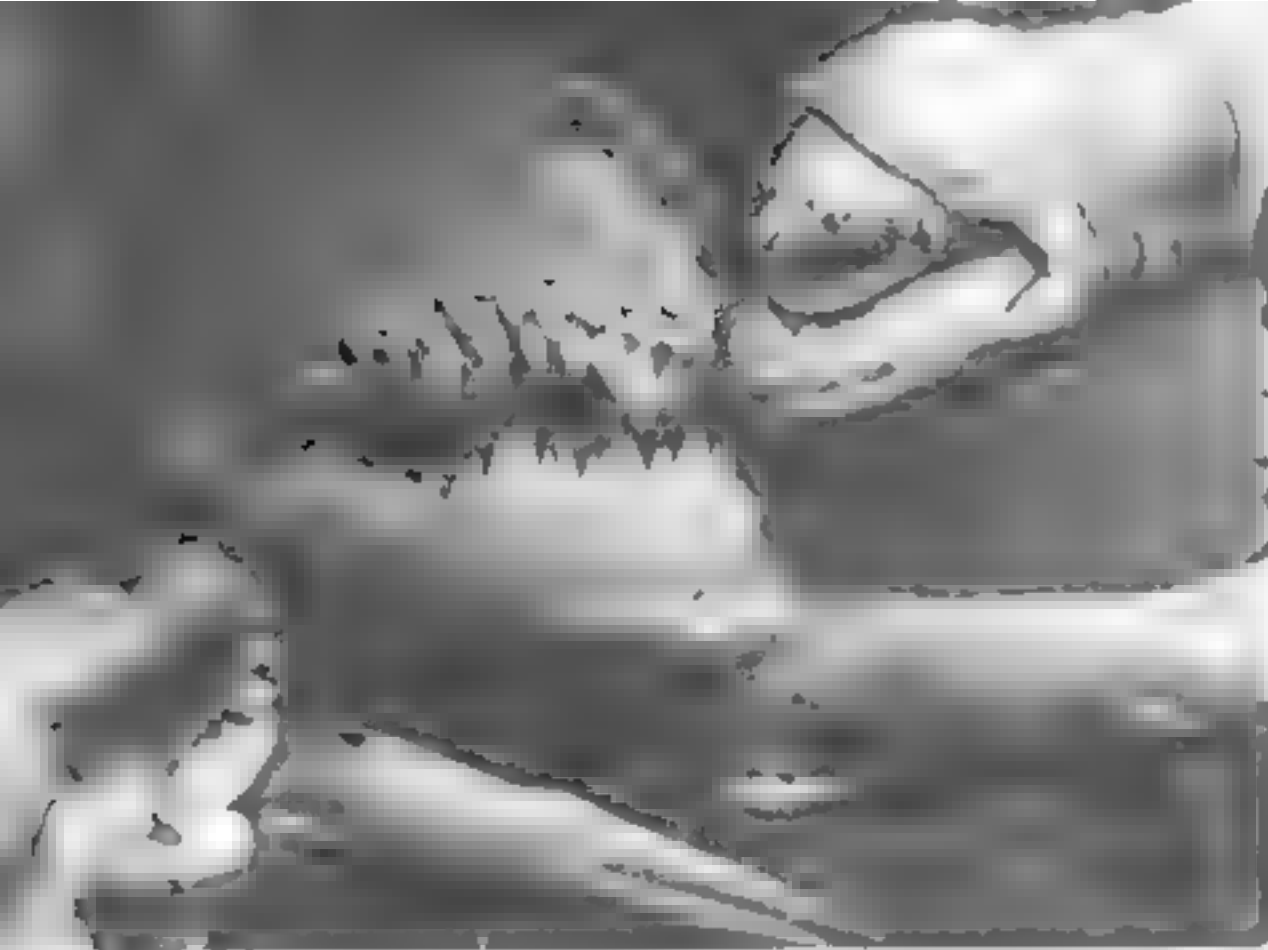
hoses! So we had to be very careful to watch out for the police on top of everything else. I also had to instruct the crew member each time in the correct angles of rainfall and so forth. What we really needed was a rain wrangler! In the shot out the kitchen window at the end of the break away scene, the little tree outside is being shaken so violently it looks like a hurricane. But I couldn't pay attention to that since I had to operate the camera for that shot! The cinematographer of the day — our credited DP didn't always show up, said it was an impossible shot to get. He said he would have to scrunch up under a cab net on the counter, and he couldn't do it. So, it fell to me, and I hand-held it. At the end of the film there is a high-angle panning shot when Mike runs into the yard to find Charles in shock with a medic played by Tim, his father, and the DP of the day would not go on the roof of the garage to shoot it, so I did that shot too, as well as a high angle from a van in the front yard in that sequence, amazing how many people are afraid of heights, isn't it? When I wanted a shot, I wanted a shot. I kept saying that it couldn't be shot any other way, and that was the truth once I had envisioned it a certain way.

McKeown was full of admiration for the work at which John Dods excelled, namely creature design and special effects. "The monsters were marvellous. I was terribly excited when Dods and Bohus agreed with me that we should try to do as much effects work in the frame with the actors as possible, since this challenge was rarely if ever taken up by Hollywood. I had in mind the nearly impossible-to-achieve shot in *Jaws* when Roy



Mom (Elissa Nori) in '75

A passing electrician 'Ja



John Dods' "spawn"

John Dods

Scheider is throwing out chum and the shark surfaces behind him. I mean, can you imagine how hard it was to frame that so tightly, while moving in a fast boat, and have it work? I admire that so much. And then not even a Spielberg fan. A lazy cut-in, or fixating in post, are Hollywood methods. I believe audiences know when they see a cut-in that whatever they are seeing, something is happening, so the energy just drains out of so many scenes in other movies.

One of Dods's most imaginative and innovative ideas involved the early "mudskipper" manifestations of the Spawn, seen swimming around in the waterlogged cellar. "This was John Dods at his most brilliant," agrees McKeown. "I came in one morning and he had invented this effect almost literally overnight. Like all genius ideas, it was incredibly simple. Like, 'why didn't I think of that?' simple. Maybe he stole it from somewhere, but I think he just invented it. He had a shallow box made about eight feet by four feet and filled it with no more than a few inches of water. In this he inserted a plywood sheet in which narrow squiggling pathways had been cut out with a jigsaw. This panel lay flat, just below the surface of the shallow pool. Little spawn, made of flexible foam sticks over metal armatures, were attached by a tiny stud through to the underside of the plywood in each of the pathways. It was as if each had a cufflink on its ventral side. The camera framed out the sides of the big shallow box, as well as the crew members who stood at one end and pulled a fishline attached to the front of each spawn. The little flexible bodies, submerged exactly halfway into the shallow water, merely traced the course pre-cut in the plywood, as they were pulled from one end of the box to the other. Voila! They appeared to be swimming."

The film benefits not only from Dods's dedication to his creatures but also from the focus the mainly young cast bring to their roles. Had they been wooden or exaggerated, or drama-school precious, it would have been the kiss of death; instead they help to assert the film's careful, plausibility despite a most implausible threat. McKeown agrees: "I liked that cast of actors very much and had great respect for them, working tirelessly and not complaining, and for no money. Your praise for them makes me feel just fied in

my contribution, in the high energy I brought to the set, energy and seriousness that were not always welcomed by the producer. I have to say, not very often by the effects director. Only the actors seemed to appreciate these things. Ted and John often mistook seriousness of purpose for bad vibes. I think they didn't thrive on tension, so they tried to undercut it with joking and distracting silliness. Once I actually snapped at Dods and the crew when when one of the actresses was about to scream her head off for a PIX through the monster's teeth, and they were making joke and not realizing how hard it was for her to concentrate. I think I said something like, 'She's the one being seen up here on the screen, so shut up! If I didn't say it, I said something like it, and I know she was grateful. The actor who played Pete was Tom De Franco, and he was very, very good. He worked seriously and hard, and never complained. Except once, when I stupidly filled in for a missing actor in his close-up and we kept having to do re-takes. Finally he said, 'Doug, how would you feel having to play the scene with your director?' I was instantly humbled and apologetic. I had been the cause of his discomfort, though totally unwittingly. I really like the way he did the physical stunts himself, and Tom made some nearly unspeakable lines of dialogue rip off the tongue. I honestly don't know what he later did, though I believe he continued acting."

One decision that could have backfired horribly was make an ultra-nerd youngster, Charles Huldebrandt, the primary human focus of the narrative. McKeown says, "He took direction very well like Tom, because he took the film seriously and trusted me. I gave him lines to memorize, and I also provided him with subtextual thinking, filling in beats that a professional actor would ordinarily do himself, and Charles grasped the whole deal effortlessly. I especially like him at the breakfast table with its carefully rehearsed overlapped dialogue, and in the 'psychoanalysis' scene. He was just thirteen I think, maybe fourteen, and was not a film kid. But Dods later added a great deal of footage with Charles in the basement with the Mother Spawn, after he had begun to shoot inserts, etc., up and down the water tower. I think that material works as well as anything. Charles certainly performs bravely under the circumstances. Charles told me Dods would've let him directions like 'Look more scared.' You don't look scared enough! I saw Charles in February of 2004 when we got together to record an audio commentary for the DVD. This was a coup for Don May, I am told, because apparently, with the lower budget feature, the prime participants generally all end up never speaking to each other again! Charles never was interested in acting and is now a successful entertainment lawyer living in Washington, DC."

In scenes that provide a fair discussion in movies like Wes Craven's *Scream*, McKeown decided to include a number of exchanges, between Charles and the others about monster movies and their effects on those who watch them. This was, as McKeown says, "to saturate the movie monster scenes with interest, irony, visuals, clues. It was also to pay off later when the boy's fantasy-world obsession leads to the shrewd deployment of a WSD (a Weapon of Spawn Destruction). He knows monsters, so he's ready. Pete doesn't believe in monsters, so he's not. He won't even be able to save his girlfriend. And it's not that Pete isn't strong, brave and true; he's just paralyzed by a rigid paradigm that Charles does not hold."

Among the adult cast, John Schmerling played the wildly patronizing psychoanalyst uncle (says McKeown: "He was an actor from the Jean Cocteau Repertory Company I was associated with in New York," he notes) and played a villain in my stage musical version of *Le Count of Monte Cristo*, which I directed and designed"), and Ethel Michelson played the sweet, naive Aunt Millie. "She simply came to us in audition when another actress, a comedienne I had wanted, turned down the part. I found her to be quirky, and New York-like, and I wanted Millie to be funny. She was a real lady, and I seem to recall, she was coming back to acting from a hiatus of some kind," says James Brewster, who played the father, was actually around the same age as his son, Tom De Franco. "I tried to make him up to look older," laughs McKeown, "but I think I only made him look hung over."

Kalotou Ili'

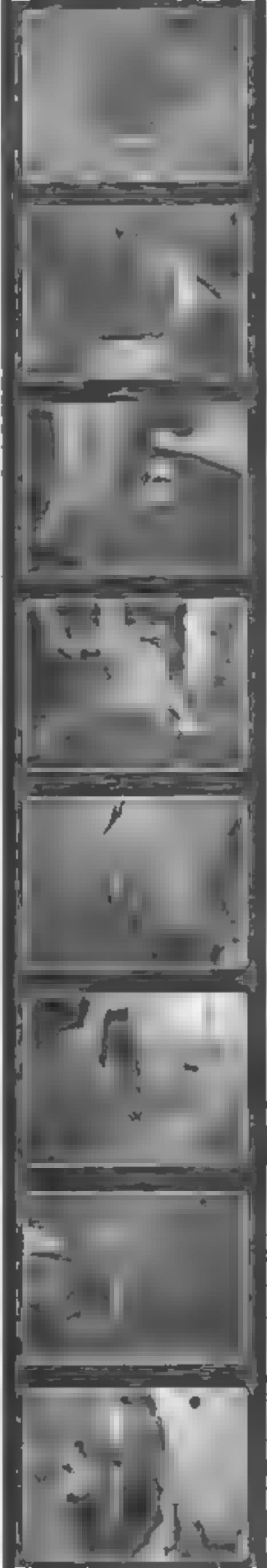
■ A film with so many wonderful scenes, it is still, when it's said and done, quite easy to choose the best. The vegetarian luncheon that goes horribly wrong must be one of the funniest scenes in a horror picture. I asked McKeown what he remembered about shooting this classic night in monster movie history.

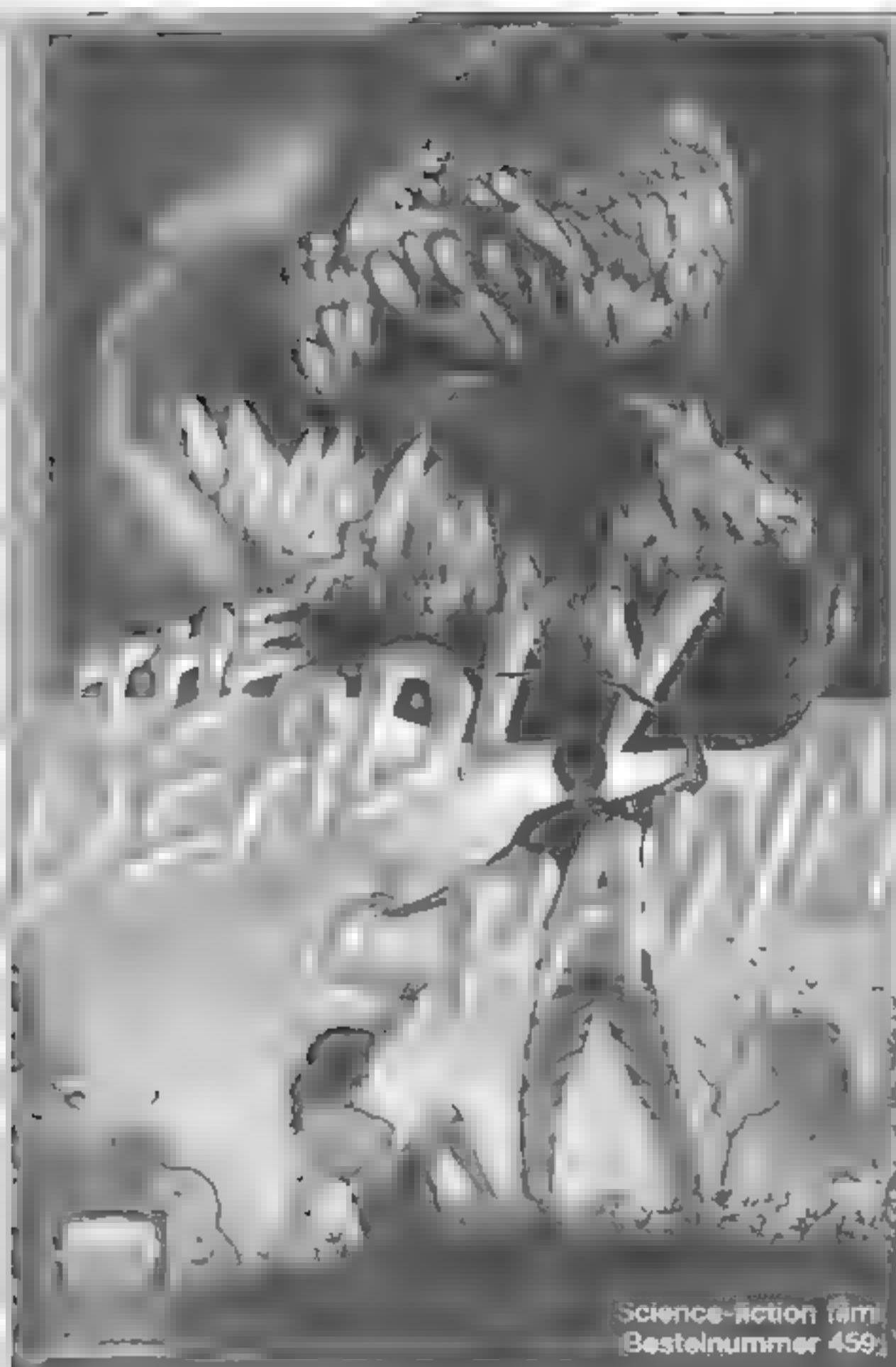
remember all of it! My favourite sequence in the Dads and I were in complete agreement about the rest of the sequence – it is really two scenes, the preparation with M. Lee and Bunnie, and the actual luncheon! He was rather more prepared with effects for the two shooting sessions (on two successive Saturdays as I recall) than at other times. Plus, I got enough concessions on special effects in shot with the actors that I accepted his advice that he be allowed to do a lot later as inserts. I added the food processor gag, which I remember as the original (I wish I had been called in for those set-ups. Especially the suspenseful one. I would have liked Dads' move that baby spawn faster, or in the final have cut the shot's duration in half – maybe more. and I think I have made them put more sauce on the spawn! But it was a crowd-pleaser, and I am told it was stolen later for a show called *Gremmie*, though I never saw that. I especially enjoyed the cast of the luncheon scene, since three of the actresses were personal friends. 'Hilde and Nibbs' were Arlene Kenney and Diane Stevens, a comedy team I wrote and directed at the time – they played nightclubs in New York, and Ju-Ju was Dr Madeleine Charanis, who was my French teacher in high school and later my mother-in-law. She was the wife of a distinguished Byzantine scholar from Rutgers University in New Brunswick. We all had a great deal of fun! Bunnie was Judith Mayes, an actress who had played the maid in an Off-Off Broadway production of *Moliere's School for Wives* and who had played Aristophanes some years before. Her acting style was that of a ready-made character, and her thought would help put over the speech about the peace-loving gorillas. She was quite game and without any airs as she finished film I think shows. My favourite bit was Madeline hammering at spawns with her shoe as she fled the house, a crew member's wife (I think) who was a real wild card. Her scene was a great gag! Good bit was really just a Hitchcockian touch – was fond of food gags, like the supper scene in *Frenzy* with Royce Landis putting out her cigarette in an egg.

you know *The Catch a Thief* – also loved when M. he
 walked and tossed the baby spawn and Dods later
 inserted the picture frame exposing the spawns on the wall
 behind it, like cockroaches. All of this was planned and
 storyboarded in advance, of course, as was all of the
 principal photography, else we could never have shot such
 tight sequences on no budget. The DP was rarely happy
 that I had pre-planned so carefully the angles and
 lighting. I left him little to do but light and shoot.
 And he knew almost nothing about lighting. He was
 probably hired because he owned the camera and the
 lights. I also remember Kathy having to come up with
 green sauce and brown rice for the scene, and Madeline
 herself making the centerpiece using an aubergine (except
 she gave it whiskers, so it looks like a baby seal.) And
 Darlene (Hilde, spelled Hildey in the film) came up with a
 hairline after the one I had written. They're Swedish sex
 balls, to which she added, 'You can freeze them, you
 know.' I remember we had to take care not to stain Ted's
 parents' furniture with the fake blood, so on the couch in
 one shot the pool of blood is a piece of red latex!

Post-Production and Fall-Out

Throughout principal photography, tensions had been mounting between McKeown and John Dods, and when it came time to physical y int... ..
dramatic context, with the actors present and the clock ticking, sparks began to fly. "I shot quickly," McKeown explains, "and I expected that the effects planned in advance would be up and ready on time, always allowing of course for the inevitable unplanned problems. I work fast in action sequences to keep the actors and crew "up to match energy. This is critical when scenes are shot in pieces; they don't mesh together well later if the energies don't match. And I always knew how they were to be edited—that's why I shot so little coverage. But Dods always wanted to take it slow whenever his monsters were in the shot. He usually said at the last minute that he needed more time, and when I refused to postpone because the actors were on call—Ted would have to step in and insist that we improvise and proceed—I know th s real y upset Dods, but what was I to do? I had the cast for only a short time, and I knew the opportunity to work with them (for free) was not going to last. Dods seemed to have no grasp of any of this—which would have been fine by which I mean he was focused on effects. But he had grander ideas. I think. He saw this as an effects film, a Dods film, the way *Jaxxon* and *The Argonauts* is a Larryhausen film. My calling out directions to move the monster faster or more aggressively, or in some fashion he had not anticipated—elit there on the set in front of everyone, really began to irk him, and he barked more than once. I remember he absolute y refused to bri... .. thing upstairs behind Kathy to tear her blouse, said it wouldn't look right, what I was asking was not possible he'd do it later as an insert, etc. But I remember real y putting my foot down on that one and insisting. Luckily Ted persuaded him, saying it was only one shot, he'd help move it himself, not to worry. But I think the real problem was basically that Dods thought of the Mother Spawn—the protagonist—she was the star, the opera diva, to him. Plus, it was him, n a way. He was playing the monster and I don't think he could appreciate the emphasis I was placing on the human characters."





Science-fiction film
Bestelnummer 459

Towards the end of shooting, the storm finally broke. Very late in principal photography, virtually at the end, in fact (I think we were up to the attic sequence), he called me at home late at night, and in a low, affectless voice said he wanted 'to direct the film'. I was speechless. 'Come again?' I had just directed it. What did he mean? He merely repeated that he wanted to direct it. It was a weird call, now realise it must have been a very difficult call for him to make.

Ted Bohus had so far been acting as mediator between the two men, but at this point he chose to side with Dods, and McKeown was removed from the picture. "In Ted's mind, I think *The Deadly Spawn* was his film, and I he

shared it with anyone: it was with Dods, I slaved over it as if I owned it, but I didn't. Contracts really didn't mean a lot, I signed one, but Ted never signed a copy of it. I had had my lawyer look it over and he had suggested some clarifying language, no substantive changes at all. Well, Ted said he would have to take those changes under consideration. Every time I asked about it, he put me off and in the meantime, I was working day and night on the film, and had no energy left over for politics or negotiations. Seems naïve now, but I wanted badly to work, and didn't want to jeopardise that. Then, after Dods got it to direct, he told Ted he might consider leaving the film before it was finished, complained about my directing and delivered a 'him-or-me' ultimatum. Ted must have decided to cut me out, or at least downsize my participation. (Twenty three years on, Dods sent me a copy of the ultimatum letter he had sent Ted in 1981 and expressed his regret for having written it.) I remember in one frosty phone call, Ted suggested I would not be turned away if I wished to continue to come out to watch them film the effects and even look on as they began the editing process in New Brunswick, but I would certainly have to pay for my own transportation, etc. At that point, I was pretty demoralised. Besides, I owed a lot of money and I was without a job. Could I have afforded to pay for daily transportation even if I hadn't minded being unwelcome on the film that I had just written and directed? Major bummer as you can imagine. There was another factor: one that now Bohus was blown out of proportion by Bohus to help him justify ending my participation. There had been a stranger on the set during one of the all-night attic filming sessions. An older lady photographer from a local Jersey paper. I was never introduced to her, but I saw her taking pictures and was mildly irritated, since it was a little disruptive. We had way too much to get done that night and everyone was already tired and cranky. I was trying to move things along. Suddenly Ted announced we would 'break' and he would take everyone out for pizza or something. I was speechless. I hadn't slept in a couple of nights, but I was so ready to work, and I felt we could get it all done. I pushed. Now, everything sagged and dropped, and I was very discouraged and angry. They all took off. I sat outside on the porch smoking a cigarette and had a casual conversation with the lady photographer. I don't remember our conversation, but she seemed like a nice lady. Well, I'm sure you are ahead of me! Seems there was consequently a piece in that local paper about a 'feud' on the set between producer and director. Quoting me: 'The "photographer" was a reporter! I never saw the article, but Ted accused me of trying to undermine his film. I was flabbergasted and protested that it was my film too and why would I undermine it?' I guessed he must have just assumed that's the way everyone behaves, cutting off their noses to spite the crown faces. McKeown pauses, adding ruefully: 'The phone calls I got from these two guys were too much. I had this crazy idea they should be grateful for my contributions.'

Whatever the ultimatum Dods threw at the producer, this complete breakdown of working relations appears to have been handled poorly by Bohus, who allowed Dods to dictate an ungrateful and bitterly unfair treatment of the director. Absorbed in the gritty-gritty of the production director and designer failed to take time out for reasonable communication, but such considerations could and should

have been taken on board by the producer McKeeown's shoot it fast and get me the monsters – style may have chafed the pride and obsessiveness of the *Spawn*'s creator but it's unusual for a producer to side with someone intent on gobbling up financial resources against the one man who's trying to keep the budget on track. If, as it proved, there was more money available for effects reshoots and inserts, there's no reason why McKeeown couldn't have been made aware of this and kept in the loop. To fire a director on the eve of completion, when he's fought to bring your movie in within the budget and on time, then neglect to inform him of the film's eventual release is shabby treatment indeed. "I was no longer communicated with after the early summer of 1983," McKeeown sighs, "and only learned of the finished film's release in April of 1983 when I saw the advert in the *New York Times*." I know John Dods took months after we finished what I would call principal photography to plan and set up some of the most beautifully photographed shots in the film. Almost the entire Charles-meets-Mother-Spawn basement sequence was Dods's work, for example, and to my eye Charles looks to be at least a year older – ended up owing a lot of money. I tried to get a free poster after the picture opened – had to fight for it at some shabby office in mid-town. Kept saying indignantly to a snooty lady, "But I directed it!" I finally got one. I only saw the completed film at its opening night. I almost missed the evening entirely because I had to work late at a restaurant. I arrived with four or five friends for moral support. I was anxious, remember. I had thought this movie would never be completed because no one had contacted me in almost two years! So I assumed that if there ever was a finished product, it would be messy and confused at best, incoherent at worst. While it was never exactly the latter – often was the former. I had a brief reunion with Tom Schramm and kind of waved at Ted Bohus and John Dods, but had no real conversation with anyone except the editor, whom I had never met before. I remember he was amazed to learn I possessed the actual shooting script. "There was a shooting script? Nobody told me that!" Said he wished he had known. He was full of compliments about the ease with which the pieces had fit together, but added as he left there was so little coverage – he said I barely left room at the tail of a scene for it to flush before being cut. Well, he was right to be annoyed, but I hadn't wanted anyone messing with the timing. No I called cut pretty much where it would splice better later. The only scene I got to edit myself was an early one: the mother going down to the basement looking for Barb and getting attacked. We took that sequence to a convent on shortly after I assembled it, to drum up publicity, and it remained in the finished film just as I cut it, with of course many true additional shots of blood splattering and too much swinging light bulb, tacked on later by others. Beautifully lit, of course, since Dods had had at the time in the world without actors around). Up until the moment Ted effectively took the film away from me, he had planned to rent a Steenbeck editing table and put it in my apartment so I could assemble all the footage shot up to that point with slugs where the cut-in effects would go. I was the only one holding the complete shooting script, which I had written week by week with the editing in mind, so it made sense. But no one even asked for it later on. No wonder I always assumed the picture would never come out.

It Came from New Jersey

The Unseen *Deadly Spawn*: Douglas McKeeown's cut

After McKeeown was elbowed out, John Dods and Ted Bohus took creative decisions that flew in the face of McKeeown's prior intentions. I asked him to explain where he thinks key mistakes were made once the movie was taken away from him: the following comments help us to visualise McKeeown's intended cut.

***Opening scenes:** "The effects shot of the meteor shooting down appears to happen in daylight (and it is followed immediately by the campers hearing the crash in the dead of night). It looks like, at best, day-for-night, and why shoot a studio model in day-for-night? And then the establishing shot of the house – at dawn during a rainstorm!" – shows a starry sky with crickets chirping and a dog barking. So ridiculous. (Though I adore the model work, technically.)

***First basement scene:** "Here was the Mother Spawn in the basement as I cut it, but there are wrong inserts suddenly: the cut-ins of the drain that both the father and mother see are stupid and confusing, blood when there shouldn't be blood, no blood when there should be; then the shots following that face-ripping shot we so carefully created include these overlong clichés of flailing hands and swinging light bulb and blood splattering on walls – and one red-filtered close-up of Barb screaming that should not be there. Actions missing. There is no shot of the spawn actually biting off the ringed finger, for example! The finger is suddenly just there on the floor (in a beautifully, lovingly photographed close-up). Simply for continuity, we needed a shot, one quick horrific shot inserted of the spawn rearing its head back like a croc and gulping the forearm, snapping down, and perhaps another quick one of the finger flying, but instead – nothing! And suddenly the open mouth is empty and coming after Barb."

***Missing characterisation:** "The first love scene between Pete and Ellen is also gone (their best-acted scene!), rendering some of their subsequent dialogue confusing. Dods told me when I saw him in 2004 that they deliberately crashed the scene because 'the movie would have been too long.' I did not reply that among sequences he *crashed* I could easily have trimmed about five minutes! I'm thinking in particular about the extended Charles-in-basement sequence.

Missing plot: "A whole bit that Dods and I had talked about at some length, showing that the spawns regenerate in an 'impossible' way, a kind of biological fallacy, devouring portions of their own corpses, was simply dropped, no effects created to show this as we had discussed: but a slow track into the kitchen sink, where we were actually to see this process (after causing the kids to rush excitedly downstairs to show Uncle Herb), among other elements created with this in mind, remained as shot. It puzzled the audience, I think, or at least the people I was with.

***The vegetarian luncheon scene:** "Dods added shots of spawn chewing on vegetable matter. He apparently thought it was amusing, but it's wrong. The spawns like water and flesh... period. Having them chewing celery or parsley undercuts the irony of the vegetarian luncheon scene. There are so many examples of things like that that made me wince as the opening night on Broadway in 1983. However, there were also additions that delighted and surprised me. For example, someone wrote a clarifying voice-over to a shot of the luncheon, "I've added something new this time." Also, back in the kitchen breakfast scene, the radio weather reporter ends with, "It's going to be a really *bad* day." I did not write those lines, but I wish I had!"



Behind the scenes, a few
scenes from the movie



Awful teeth and pretty girls (1983, 2004)



Figure 7-14

***The discovery of the spawn-riddled corpse of Uncle Herb.** "Those reverse angle effects shots of Uncle Herb being eaten up last too long (they were created after I left). Compare the duration with the shots leading up to and away from it, the action shots I did shoot, with the kids rushing in, spawns threatening at the edges of the frame, and the close up of them kicking back spawns in trying to close the sliding door, just before Mother Spawn makes her appearance in the kitchen. Startling and over-the-top as the Uncle Herb effects are, the duration should have been much less, maybe half the time. We see too much, enough for the scariness to seep out.

***Ellen's demise.** "I really could go on and on. Don't even get me started on the sequence of effects shots Dods did to cover Ellen's demise. The actress actually looks resentful instead of terrified in the very bad POV shot of her suddenly just sitting on the floor waiting to get her head bitten off."

***The ending.** "This had me feeling most ambivalent. The idea I'd had for it was unsatisfactory, but I thought we would know how to make it work when the time came. Anyway, I now think the idea I had was soft and slightly dull. You may remember Charles is assisted into the patrol car at the end of the final sequence and sits stupefied in the back seat. This whole shot was in the initial screening. From that point, I had proposed: Camera tracks in to the open cruiser window. Charles, now left alone in the back seat, blinks and jerks his head, as if jolted out of shock for a moment, and then anxiously leans his head out the window and looks up searchingly. The camera *cranes* slowly up, and then up and up, past the extras zapping spawns and the police and flashing lights, and up all the way to the edge of the Earth's atmosphere, where the blue gradually becomes black and star-studded. Zip! Zip! Zing! Suddenly these meteors scream past the lens, first a few and then a gazillion in a fiery shower... The End. Well, that 'ending' thrilled no one, rightly so, never got filmed of course, and instead there is a picture film I immediately recognised as the camera rolling after cut" a long shot from the same angle as before, the one wherein Pete was being led tail-away to an ambulance (this reverse angle was shot far away from the actual house, with some development) but there are no actors in the shot, only crew! Apparently, the DP unbeknownst to me, had shot

footage of the crew packing up, and now it was in the film. I guess the editor used every extra bit he could lay his hands on. The very last shot they came up with surprised me. Not entirely unpleasantly, although it was a bit of a cartoon. Well, the movie can't be taken too seriously, I suppose, and the final shot is a pay off, in a way.

McKeown finally breaks off and laughs. "Am I whining?" Maybe I was just too darn fastidious, but it's attention to detail like these that engages me as a filmmaker, even as a spectator of other people's art. Putting aside his grievances, though, McKeown admits "There were lines of dialogue, added by others, that really help the film, and careful photography by Dods—again, technically excellent—that I simply couldn't get during the months I shot live action with other DPs. These things were a pleasure to see on the big screen, even if the dramatic content dismayed me. In general, the editor did a noble job of making sense of the jigsaw puzzle, but many pieces are placed nowhere near where I foresaw them in my editing plan, so I was bothered almost every other shot: it was hard to enjoy the film story unfolding with these constant jolts. I was pleasantly surprised at how well some of the scenes/shots worked, but I cringed, actually slumped down in my seat during others. The worst part was knowing that there was this bad stuff I didn't do. No, even worse perhaps was knowing that some of the bad stuff I *did* do. But no, maybe even worse than *that*, some of the really good stuff I *didn't* do."

Looking Back

Although McKeown's experiences at the time left him bruised, angry and disappointed, he has always remained willing to acknowledge the work of his colleagues. "I certainly don't mean to suggest that the other two guys weren't absolutely committed to the film," he stresses. "John Dods came up with some amazing effects on practically no budget at all, and Ted held the whole thing together and dealt with logistics that would be daunting for anyone. When it all worked out, it was more fun than I can say. I always loved work more than anything: eating or sleeping or even sex well, to be frank, maybe just as much as—and when it paid off, as for example in the vegetarian luncheon scene, I felt even at the time that we were making something quite special, something original. I suppose it should be clear by now that I love movie-making and would do nothing else if I could. I had the same intense passion when I shot my first 8mm footage in the early sixties as I had the last time I worked in video, and every time in between. *The Deadly Spawn*, with all its attendant craziness and obstacles, rumours and discouragements, was no different. Not only could I not wait to get to work every morning, I barely wanted to go to sleep the night before. (Still writing and sketching!) I suppose the most rewarding part was watching the dailies and seeing what I wanted to get, or maybe something better than I expected, suddenly on the screen. My intrepid actors were amazing, considering the conditions under which they laboured. I can very easily wax nostalgic for those early Saturday morning meetings with sleepy-eyed actors at the Camelot Coffee Shop on the corner of 8th Avenue and 45th Street, where we had coffee and breakfast and went over lines before the car picked us up and drove us to New Jersey. Of course the rehearsal process on any project is terribly exciting, always. But I was directing my own script from ideas hammered out maybe only days or



I am in 1980, looking
 back and think
 I am on the
 edge of
 a new era

A black and white photograph of a person sitting at a desk in a room with large windows, looking down at a book or document. The person is wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants. The room has a high ceiling and large windows in the background. The person is sitting on a chair, and their hands are resting on the desk. The desk is covered with a light-colored cloth. The person is looking down at a book or document that is open on the desk. The person's face is partially visible, and they appear to be focused on their work. The overall atmosphere is quiet and studious.

[illegible]

Let's Play Nasty

The Films of Don Jones

Abducted (1973)

Sue (Lynn Ross), a pretty young redhead, is stranded on the freeway after her car breaks down. A good-looking soft-spoken man called Frank Barrows (Gary Kent) picks her up and offers to drive her to the nearest garage. Once on the road, friendly Frank becomes taciturn, and worse still his retarded brother John (John Stoglin) pops up from the back seat. Sue leaps from the car as it waits at a railway crossing, but the train blocks her escape and she's bundled back in. Once at the brothers' isolated house, she's thrown into the cellar, where she finds two more girls, Ginger (Suzanne Lund) and Stevie (T.R. Blackburn), already imprisoned. Stevie is delirious with pneumonia, but warns the new arrival: "But if you meet Momma, then you'll be sorry you came here." Sue wastes no time and bravely makes a run for it, but she's shot down by Frank before she can reach the highway.

John comes down to the cellar and insists on playing a game of doctors and nurses. After he assaults Ginger with a hypodermic needle, she tries to sweet-talk Frank into letting her go, but instead he rapes her. Afterwards, in a flashback, we learn that Frank was sexually abused by his mother (Greta Gaylord). John begs Momma to allow him a sex playmate and chooses Bonnie (Leah Tate aka Cheryl Cherry), an attractive blonde he's spied upon while hanging around the local college campus. Momma gives her assent and Bonnie is brought to the rat-infested cellar. Can she escape where the others have failed?

*Of all the exploitation films that trailed in the wake of *Blackrock's Psycho*, Don Jones's *Abducted* stands out for its sleazy atmosphere and surprisingly strong performances. Jones went on to make three more genre pieces, including the excellent terror-in-the-woods tale *The Forest*, but *Abducted* is his best: a classic rural horror tale with those uniquely dirty 1970s fingerprints all over it. In America the film is better known as *Schoolgirls in Chains*, a title bestowed on it by its second distributor in place of Jones's original choice, *Pitavend*. There are, in truth, no actual schoolgirls caught up in the plot, but that's not to say the film isn't shocking at times. It's a classic of early seventies horror cinema, with all the lascivious dwelling upon women-in-peril that implies.*

Jones and cinematographer Ron Garcia make good use of the attractive orange-grove locations and beautifully decorated farmhouse interior, contrasting them to great effect with the dingy, rat-infested cellar where the victims

are imprisoned. Good mileage too is gained from that trusty stand-by of the horror genre, the extreme wide-angle lens, used to rack up the tension at the start of the film, with the bulbous grille of Frank's car looming menacingly into frame, and then later, in the cellar, after Ginger is poked and pierced with a syringe. Garcia's queasy wide-angle shots of John examining the girls' breasts, with a coat-hanger as a stethoscope, suggest either that a mind-bending drug has been administered or, more likely, that the director malevolently wishes to induce a faint in those who find injection scenes distressing.

Unlike most low-budget horrors, *Abducted* gains real leverage from its actors, which is a blessing because the film relies heavily on Gary Kent and John Stoglin to make the drama work. Corny psychos can be fun in a campy way, but they're not going to elicit sympathy, and sympathy for both victims and killers is the surprise suit of this film. John Stoglin's performance as 'John' is outstanding, given that the characterisation could easily have veered into hamminess. An accomplished dancer and theatre actor, he gives a lot more than the script probably asked for in a role that tempts ridicule but quells it through sheer nerve; the mixture of pathos and menace he creates is the hallmark of a skilled and thoughtful performer. What's also interesting is the way the characterisation plays with the audience. 'John' not only torments young women, he also taunts the viewer, goading both into nervous discomfort and sleazy complicity. Stoglin plays John as a retarded child locked into an endless loop of excitement and frustration. A lesser actor would simply allow the viewer to feel illicitly turned-on watching the girls' violation and humiliation, instead Stoglin's performance makes us squirm, as we see male rape fantasies played out in a creepy, childish way.

Gary Kent has the quieter role, but he's perfect as the strong, soft-spoken Frank. Seemingly the more 'normal' brother, his damage is more subtle: his identity short-circuited by a mother who demanded her son be the 'man of the house' rather too literally. Kent is a big, handsome fellow whose weathered masculinity would have won him roles in the classic westerns twenty years previously, but he's skilful at subverting the machismo of this six-foot burn-door of a rapist, as much as with John, there's a child in Frank, and Kent makes sure we can see the character's trauma in his features, without sliding into bathos or exaggeration. He makes us pity Frank, even after he's raped Ginger (of which more later). The flashback to his abuse at

Incredibly rare VHS video cover for *Abducted* under its most notorious title, *Schoolgirls in Chains*. From Portland Films, who also released the doozy *Joe Death Sex*.





Abducted



Images from rap
Sue (Lynn
and)

Center for the American video release of
The Love Butcher from Monty Home



the hands of his incestuously domineering mother could easily have been played purely for sick laughs, thanks to Greta Gaylord's marvellously over-ripe performance as the mother. However, Kent makes Frank believable (despite being decked out in white clothes so luminous they're virtually radioactive), his zoned-out demeanour as he obligingly massages Momma's breast suggests the way that his mind is shut down by her dominance. And by the time we realise Frank is actually *dressing* as Momma to keep her alive, for John as well as himself, we're saddened not amused, a testament to Kent's composure in the role.

It's not just a case of pity the killer, though. Jones's laid direction ensures we very much fear for the girls who fall into these all-too-human monsters' hands. Two of the girls are strong characters who refuse to accept their imprisonment and immediately try to escape. This of course helps propel the narrative, but it's also worth noting, in a film often decried for misogyny, that resistance is given as much emphasis as captivity. Unlike, say *The Burn of the Naked Dead* by Alan Rudolph. The first victim, Sue, is a fiery character who, when thrown into the cellar with the others, immediately starts plotting for freedom. We expect her to be the ringleader, inspiring the others to rebel against their captors. Wrong – Jones shocks the audience by scratching her off the scorecard early, after a tense and well-crafted chase. Shades of Janet Leigh, of course, but the *Psycho* resonances are well absorbed into the story, which never feels like a retread.

Abducted hinges its psychology on the notion of aggressive, clinging motherhood, the brothers' insanity is born of a domineering matriarch whose hatred of men has created monsters. (She's said to have murdered her husband too, although nothing was proven.) Unpleasant though this

may seem to viewers raised on feminism, a look at the backgrounds of many serial killers (Ed Gein, Edmund Kemper, Henry Lee Lucas, for example) bears out the approach. As artfully mentioned though, it's possible to be amused as well as shocked by this maternal monster: the scene where Frank's mother reveals their incestuous relationship to her son's superficially 'modern' yet rather prim girlfriend Jane (Russell Lane) is a classic piece of American Gothic melodrama, as she boastfully announces: *We make love, we make love like two lovers. We have since he was fifteen [] Come back any time, we'll let you watch!* (Eagle-eyed viewers with a sick sense of irony may have noticed that behind Frank, as he starts to tell Ginger how his mother abused him, we can see a sheet-music score bearing the words 'Teaching Little Fingers How to Play'.)

Not all the film's ploys are successful. Jones cheats the audience to make us believe Momma is still alive, showing us a figure cowed in a shawl, sat in semi-profile and moving slightly, lips just visible as she speaks to Frank. She continues to speak (*Ah, it's good to have two fine boys*) even after Frank has left the room, making it hard to explain the scene as simply a visualization of his madness. Worse still, the fine line between sleazy subject matter and sleazy direction swings into view when Frank rapes Ginger, to the accompaniment of a skirling saxophone denoting sensuality on the soundtrack. Given that Frank is impotent with girls other than Momma, it's possible to argue that the music mocks the affliction of the rapist, but it can just as easily suggest that rape victims secretly 'love it'. There's also a grim irony here, because Ginger initially tried to use her feminine charms to get Frank to release her. When he turns nasty, it's almost as if she's brought the rape on herself, which gives the 'sexy' soundtrack an unwelcome dose of sarcasm.

However, this is the only mis-step by Josef Powell who turns in an oddball but memorable score, playing away from the obvious horror tropes by unsettling rather than terrorizing the listener. (Incidentally, *Abducted* must be the only grindhouse/drive-in movie to have made use of Debussy's sublime *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.) Powell's arrangements are creative and offbeat, based around piano and electric piano, with ensemble work for brass and woodwind. The inclusion of a minor-key flute motif gives the film a tinge of the S.F. Brownings, while the trumpets, trombones and weird ensemble vocals add an unpredictable hint of derangement. The story's 'arrested childhood' theme is picked up by eerie arrangements of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* and *Three Blind Mice*, and, strangest of all, by a playground Greek Chorus of shrieking voices yelling 'Run! Run!' over Sue's fatal sprint for freedom. Perhaps the title song, *Triangles, Circles and Squares*, is a touch too mannered, its meandering rather archly delaying resolution via a dissonant semitone, but for the final scene Powell comes up with a successful variant, supporting Stoglin's emotional fade-out with a sorrowful cello.

Storywise, *Abducted* falters slightly in the last reel when it introduces Bonnie, a young female student, and Bob (Robert Mathews), her psychology professor/lover, a couple whose intervention is meant to bring things to a climax. Trouble is, we've spent too long watching events at the farmhouse to engage with their apathetic love affair. Waters is okay once she's endangered, but Mathews is just a regulation cut-out hero, thudding in to the rescue. It's a shame the script didn't elaborate some of its fainter

ations about him in a film about a mother who
her authority, it's interesting that Bob is abusing
y authority too, by seducing a student and paying her off
with good grades. He's nowhere near as bad, of course
his lack of professional scruples makes the point that
the exploitation is not the sole preserve of the mad
ness is particularly acute given that Bob is a psychology
and not a very self-aware one either. After all
drives a red Porsche – surely a bit of a *mea culpa* for a
psych. professor with an overactive libido?

As the film reaches its climax there are a few striking
moments to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, made a year
later. Bonnie runs upstairs to the white-painted farmhouse
tries to take refuge in a bedroom, only to discover a
corpse on the bed, withered to the point of mummification.
Of course *Psycho* is the true source of this image, but the
fact that the corpse is discovered on the first floor by a
young woman who runs screaming downstairs and out
through a gauze screen-door, makes it feel like a dry run.
Hooper's film. You can imagine Hooper at the drive-in
singing "Abducted and thinking, 'Good idea!' Abducted
and compete with *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* for
mind-bruising horror, but Jones pulls off a
stating finale of his own, ensuring that our last impres-
sion is not sexual or visceral, but emotional. If there is
perhaps just a smidgeon too much "Pity the killers" here for
tastes, Jones does at least leave us glad that both their
and their suffering is over.

The Love Butcher (1975)

Butcher is something of a curio's egg, with its
murder theme pulling against a broadly satirical
treatment of the killer as super-nerd turned super-stud. It's
kinda weirdly enjoyable, once you've resigned yourself to a
funny ride. When I first saw this, back in the early 1980s,
I was disappointed, essentially because it failed to live
down to the savagery I'd imagined from the title. This was
after all, the era when films like *The Driver* *Killer* and *SS
Men of Letters* lectured at you from high street video
shelves. *The Love Butcher* is the sort of title that promises
all the most reprehensible elements of sleaze cinema
– graphic horror and cruel, nasty sex. When the film turns
out instead to have humour and lots of dialogue, and a
precious absence of sadistic gynaeceotomegical butcher-
tend to feel let down, in that classic "sizzle without the
sizzle" exploitation way. Given that the film was original-
ly titled *The Gardener*, a title that errs too far in the opposite
direction, it's little wonder that the producers chose to
change the film so luridly! However, given a chance to
re-examine it in terms, *The Love Butcher* deserves attention as a well-
thought trip into horrific black-comedy.
Playing the schizophrenic Caleb/Lester, Erik Stern
in John Hayes's *The Hang-Up* and *Tomb of the
Unknown* drives the film and makes an entertaining meal of
his own, his weirdo, up-mannerisms contrasting
wonderfully with his swanky Lothario. He essentially gives
the film its charm, and the movie would be a non-starter
without him. Of course, it's amazing what a bald wig and a
pair of, um, far glasses can do, but the character
isn't as credible as Caleb than comedy props. As for his
schizophrenic megynist Lester – with a script that feeds him
utterly absurd dialogue, the actor still manages to
make the character frightening, even though we laugh at
his deranged verbosity. Stern delivers the schizoid goods

without faltering, striking just the right tone and sailing
brithely along despite the hiccupping plot construction.
Jeremiah Beecher as the ostensible hero, Russell, is another
matter. He's deeply unconvincing, turning in a performance
that might have made the grade for Ted Mikels or Ray
Dennis Steckler but lets the side down here. The female
cast are without exception much better. Eve Mae in
particular makes her Texan hussy come vividly to life in
her brief – as she has onscreen.

Lester's mania takes the form of some erudite &
quotable rants about womankind (see below). His diatribes
bring to mind General Jack D. Ripper in *Dr. Strangelove*
whose concern for the way women "steal a man's essence"
may have provided the script with a few hints about
characterisation. The reversal of expectations in the final
act, regarding the true relationship between Lester and
Caleb, came from Don Jones, and it neatly ties the film into
his own concerns, with caustic words from a mother
sowing the seeds of future mental illness in her son.

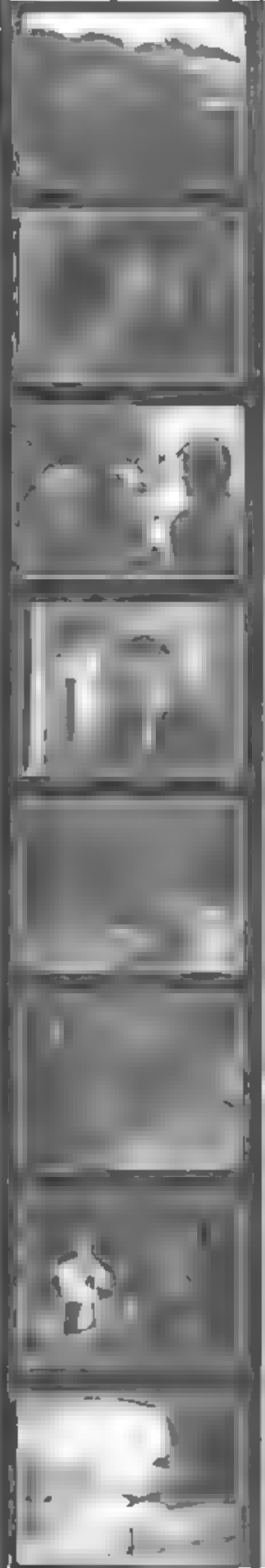
The credited director, Mike Angel, was born of
Greek parentage in Washington, D.C. in 1951, as Joseph
Theakos. *The Love Butcher* was his only feature
directing credit. Angel acted in two Matt Cimber films,
The Black 6 and *The Candy Tangerine Man*, as well as
Gary Graver's *Evil Spirits* and Joe Tornatore's *Grotesque*
(the letter of which he also wrote). Two further writing
credits, for Tornatore's *Devil's Keeper* and *Psycho
Killer* in collaboration with actor & director Ray Danton
and Greydon Clark, round out his brief filmography. (A
"Mike Angel" receives story and screenplay co-writing
credit for *Rio Lumbada* aka *Escape from Rio*, 1990).)

Angel was a theatre director turned moviemaker, and
you can see the fruits of his theatre training in the quality
of the scenes where Caleb or Lester converse with their
prospective victims. However, *The Love Butcher* suffered a
rather stormy journey to the screen when Angel pulled out
after principal shooting was completed. Don Jones, the
film's cinematographer, was asked to step in and shoot new
scenes, in order to shape the film into something releasable.
(The following synopsis is therefore accompanied by a "co-
director's commentary", kindly supplied by Don Jones.
Don's comments precede the appropriate paragraphs.)

"Hello, I'm Don Jones. I'll do my best – however until
today I haven't seen this epic in thirty years. I suppose
you know that it was shot in Techniscope. It's a two
frame pull down patented by Technicolor. In essence
2.35 to 1. Most of the following scenes are Mike's, but
since I also shot it I get confused as to which scenes
were directed by me, and which scenes were directed by
Mike (age you know).

The camera tracks past a toy train and a flower bush to
reveal a dead woman, with a garden fork shoved through her
stomach. An unseen figure clips off a yellow rose and tosses
it onto the corpse. The title *The Love Butcher* is superim-
posed over a close-up shot of a red rose. (This title card was
added later, to replace the original title *The Gardener*). More
flowers bloom beneath the rest of the credits.

At the crime scene, Russell Wilson (Jeremiah Beecher
an aggressive journalist, has a stand-up row with Captain
Stark (Edward Roehm aka Wolfgang Roehm – Richard
Kennedy)), who objects to Russell's photographer buddy
taking pictures of the woman's corpse. In retaliation,
Russell attacks the cops for their failure to catch the killer
whose murder tag is now stands at six. Cut to another



garden. Caleb (Erik Stern), a gardener-for-hire who gives the impression of mental retardation, offers a rose to Flo (Kay Neer), the lady of the house, before driving off to his next job. Once there, he asks Carla, a wealthy, irritable customer, for a glass of water. She asks him if he can recommend someone to fit air conditioning. He suggests a man called 'Les'.

Cut to Caleb's home. Caleb talks to 'Lester', who sits in an armchair. He mocks and disparages Caleb. "You're mental and physical cripple. And no-one loves a cripple." The camera pans round to reveal that 'Lester' ("I am Love Totin' Love") is a black foam mannequin with a wig perched on top. Caleb grabs the wig and, removing his thick glasses, assumes the role of Lester, an arrogant lady's man, while looking at himself in the mirror. 'Lester' now visits Carla, the irritable lady, carrying a large knife. The film fades out before he kills her. Russell faces off with Captain Stark again at Carla's house.

This next could be mine, at least part of it, but I'm not sure

Russell's lover Flo (Kay Neer) provokes a row by arguing that Russell spends too much time at work. They calm down and make love, but the next day the argument starts up again. Outside, Caleb is tending the couple's garden.

Anything with Pat I directed.

Cut to another garden, another customer. Pat (Eve Mac), a young woman with a Texan accent, complains to Caleb about the mess his sprinkler is causing. She mutters "Cripples. This fucking place is full of them. Doubt if there's a man in this state!" Caleb overhears, and mutters, "I know a good man, yes ma'am."

Later that day, Lester knocks at Pat's door wearing a cowboy hat, posing as a Texan motorist in trouble, and asks to use the phone. Pat offers him a drink. Cut to the two of them in bed, post-coitus, Lester is about to stab Pat when a religious caller interrupts. She gets rid of the caller and Lester attacks her, chasing her into the kitchen. "Your feminine pulchritude is detestable," he declares, before stabbing her to death.

Until further notice all is Mike's.

Carl (Louis Osena), a bullying husband, and his wife Sheila (Robin Sherwood) get up for work. He complains about her taste in music, and she about their infrequent love-making. Later that day, after Carl has left for work, Caleb arrives. Sheila tells him not to come back for the rest of the month as her husband is away and she doesn't want any strange men around. When Caleb gets agitated she freaks out and dismisses him. Back at home, Lester dressed in Spanish gigolo style, taunts Caleb (represented by his overalls on a coat-stand), before leaving to visit Sheila. He arrives at her door posing as a hip Latino record salesman. He puts the make on her but she turns him down. Back at home, Caleb goads 'Lester' about his failure to score. At the police station, Russell confronts Captain Stark with his (incorrect) theories about the killer's identity. Meanwhile, trying again with Sheila, Lester poses as a plumber but Sheila recognises him from the night before. As Sheila swims in her private pool, Lester dives in (losing his wig in the process) and forces a hosepipe down her throat, drowning her. He puts the corpse in the bath to make it look like suicide. Back indoors, Caleb tells Lester the violence has to stop. Lester tells Caleb that their mother was a whore; 'Lester' is legitimate, 'Caleb' was born of his mother's affair with another man.

The next scene is probably mine.

Stark and Russell meet again, at the scene of the latest killing. Stark declares, "There's one thing I do know for sure: whoever did this is weird. Not just sick, but a real weirdo."

This is Mike's.

Flo praises Caleb's work in the garden and invites Caleb in for a bite to eat.

Mine

Cops at the police station examine various murder weapons. Consulting a map, they realise that the victims were all killed in the same neighbourhood.

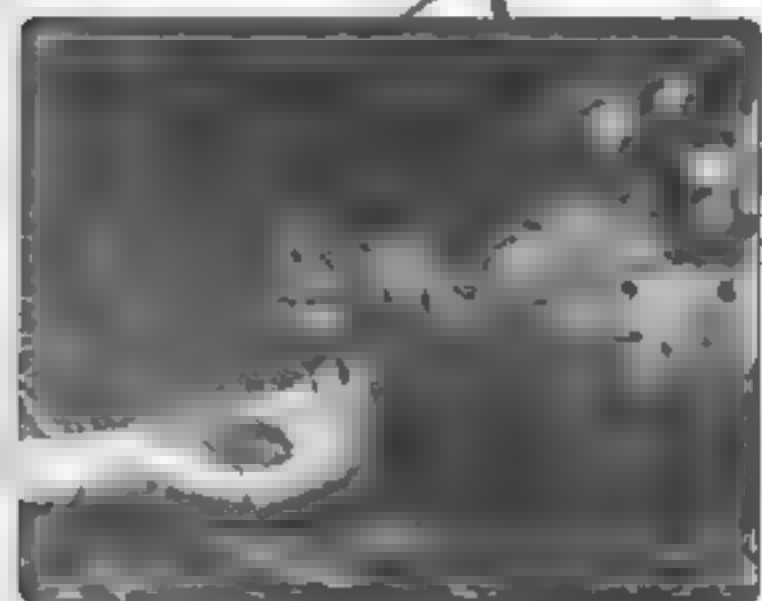
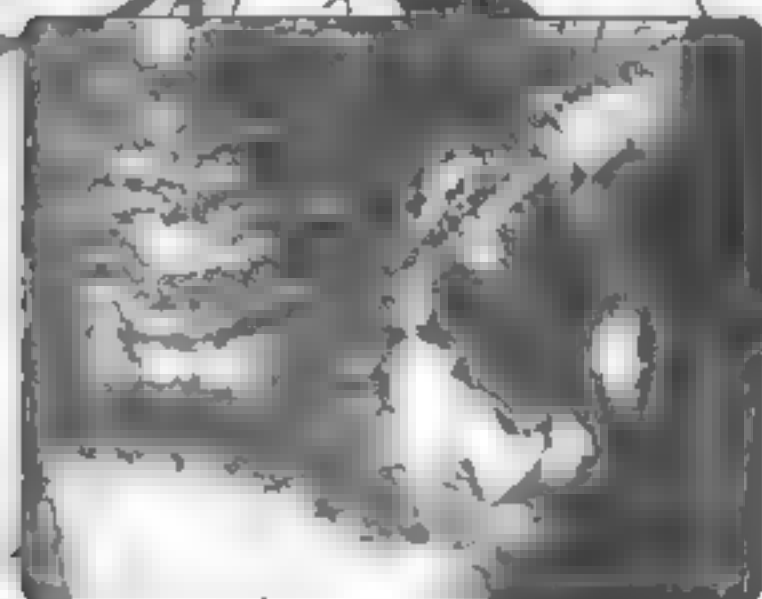
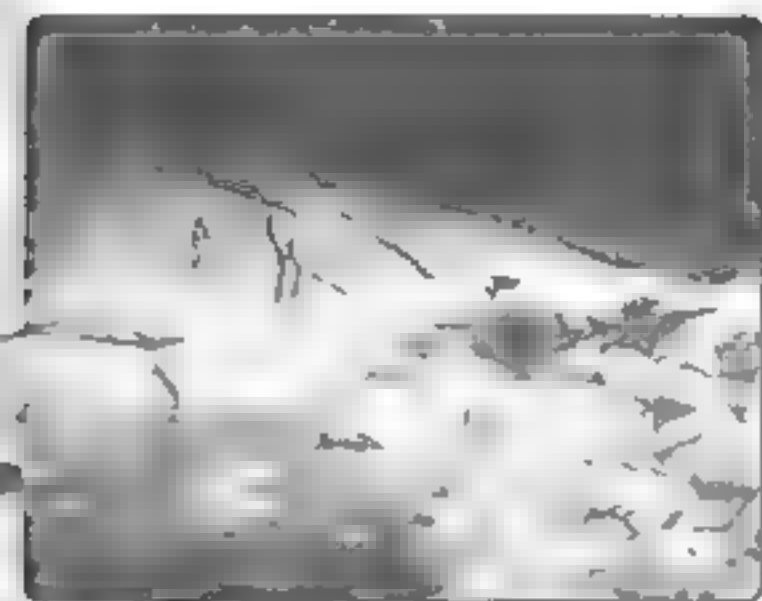
Mike's.

Caleb talks to Flo, telling her that women have never been attracted to him. "I'm a giant, mu'am" - he demonstrates by showing her his 'dead' hand - "People don't take too well to cripples." Flo goes to work and Russell tries to speak to her. She ignores him. When he persists, she says she's had lunch with Caleb - "a gentleman [] He's okay, kind of a nice weirdo." The word 'weirdo' rings a bell in Russell's mind. They wrangle for a while until Russell grabs her and kisses her, finally proposing marriage (the kitsch version of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* on the soundtrack is any indication). That night both Lester and Russell head for Flo's house. Russell stops at a phone and tries to call Captain Stark about his suspicions. Lester catches up with Russell on Flo's doorstep - "Hey, Le Boy. Wait up!" - and slabs him to death with the garden shears, before gaining entrance by posing as Caleb's doctor. Lester tells Flo his opinion of women: "You emasculate a man with your bottomless body-pits. You leave him empty and unfulfilled. You drain him like a sewer into a cesspool. I am the Great Male Adams of the Universe. I am Love." Flo runs and locks herself in the kitchen. Seeing Russell outside she opens the kitchen door, only for his corpse to tumble in. Lester stalks Flo around the house, rips off her clothes ("You will leave this world as you entered it!"), and when she begs for death rather than torture he smiles. "But of course" before hacking her to death with a serrated hoe.

Police see Lester acting strangely as he walks back home, but his smooth performance under questioning throws them off the scent. Back at home, Caleb taunts Lester. Flo didn't find him attractive - she was more concerned for Caleb. The power relationship between the two personalities shifts in Caleb's favour. "You're dead. You're nothin' [] You don't exist any more. You're a crawlin' slimy nothin'. You're a bad memory of somethin' that never was, and never shall be again." Caleb attacks the mannequin with Lester's wig on it and tears it to pieces in a psychotic rage.

The rest is mine until the end. Little Lester's name is Marcus Flower son of Buck Flower.

Outside Flo's house, a tearful neighbour talks to Captain Stark about Flo and Caleb. Next morning, Caleb walks out into his own garden, celebrating his freedom from Lester. The sound of a car's screeching tyres triggers a flashback to funeral. Little Lester (Marcus Flower) and his mother (Joan Vigman) are at Caleb's grave. Little crippled Caleb died in a car accident. Lester felt responsible for not saving his brother. "I'll be good momma, just like Caleb, honest," he vows. "You could never be like Caleb, never, never!" his mother cries. "It should have been you. Not him!" Cut back to present day and Captain Stark confronts Caleb. Caleb admits that his brother Lester was responsible for all the killings, but that he has put a stop to them by 'executing' him.



The Forest 1981

the woods, among. What do you mean you're
though already... you don't rush yet another
...asher are here may be... can say to
... but... could be a shame... not too less get
... what is really a very... a big... ex...
... are... a three or... a... after... psycho
... *shifting*... here... ash... a good... a...
... the... wings... from... the... leaves... with a
... supernatural... and some superior
... at a photography... a... on the...
... the game... instead... he... a... glad... eyes...
... *The Forest*... as... she... he... night... from

Sequoia National Park a natural resource of great beauty
with towering trees, pounding rapids, and a giant's
playground of rocks and boulders.

Two married couples—Steve & Jean Russell and
Sharon & Gene Warner (aka Gene Barret)—along with
John Bane and wife, Ann Wilkinson, embark on a
camping trip as an attempt to reinvigorate their marriages. The
women arrive first, devising their chaotic post-habitus and
striking it on their own in an arranged rendezvous point.
After several hours hiking, they set up camp on a rocky
plateau by a river. As dawn breaks, Steve and Gene are
seriously delayed by car trouble arriving in the forest late
afternoon. As night falls, Sharon and Gene are visited by
a strange, alien creature, cock Pigeon and Beck
Harker, who warn them to beware the "daddy" before

above and left: *Clash of the
Ikk*, video of *The Forest*...

below: *The Forest*...





appropriate age? man picture

at the page bottom right
Jones's cameo appearance in *The Forest*



Wendy Anderson is a hiker in *The Forest*'s
pre-credits sequence who finds her holiday
spending in a slasher-horror territory

disappearing into the darkness. Their equally ghostly mother (Jennette Kelly) also pops up, but her concerns are less philanthropic: she's seeking her children in order to punish them. Frightened by these apparitions, Sharon runs away and hides. Teddi stays, refusing to believe the children's warning, only to be attacked by John (Michael Brody aka Gary Kent), a bearded man in a baseball cap who says he intends to eat her ("I don't want to hurt you but I'm starving."). He kills Teddi and takes her body back to his lair. Arriving in the vicinity, Steve and Charlie enter a hillside cave decorated with candles and cane furniture, where they meet John. He invites them to dinner and tells them he came to live in the hills after catching his wife in bed with another man. However, he declines to tell them the whole truth: that he murdered his wife and her lover and absconded into the hills with his two children, John Jr and Jennifer. He also neglects to mention that he's murdered Teddi. Steve declines John's offer of meat from the roast he's tending on a spit, but Charlie gratefully accepts, only to shudder after a mouthful, as some nameless apprehension hits him. Next morning

spaced before the da

The Forest is a c almost unique in the horror genre, as far as I can tell (Lucio Fulci's *The House by the Cemetery* comes close: a ghostly child, slasher killings, and a ghoulish father. With Fulci as a fellow traveller, Jones is in excellent company.) The woodland prologue sets up a straightforward stalk-and-slash tale akin to *Don't Go in the Woods* or *Just Before Dawn*. The staging is efficient, the photography clean and attractive, and the first gout of blood is gratifyingly red. If this was the extent of the film's ambitions you would basically be looking at a well-made *Friday the 13th* variant, nothing more, nothing less. With the introduction of the ghostly children, though, the film takes on another dimension. They bring a sweetness and sadness to the story, as if vacationing from a spooky TV drama for kids. We learn that they committed suicide when their life in the caves became intolerable, something they admit to with a blithe cheerfulness that makes the ghostly realm somehow more believable ("It's okay. It's better than being alive. Being alive was so sad."). Just as you think you've got a grip on the format, the children's father is revealed as a cannibal, and although we never see Gary Kent chewing on arms and legs or wolfing down a raw liver (I thought screen cannibals were obliged to do that by law?), we do get plenty of loaded close-ups of Kent chewing pieces of the roasted flesh he's cooking on a spit, presumably a tasty chunk of Teddi.

An underlying theme of marital discord provides welcome real-world ballast for the story, although the treatment of female characters is occasionally patronising. Sharon and Teddi's decision to go off camping alone initially seems like a justifiable response to their husbands chauvinistic sneering. "We'd invite you along, but we kinda doubt you could take it," smirks Charlie, "The first coyote howling would send you running for home." However, on the road the girls are less sure of themselves ("Why didn't you wait for them?") and once they're in the scary old forest, it's not long before they're struggling with tent pegs and pining for the menfolk to make them feel safe again ("I wish the men were here." "Yeah. I hate to admit it, but me too."). It's a shame that Jones wasn't able to make better use of the women's strengths, although he does

neapactate Steve (with an impressively shuddersome greenstick fracture), leaving him reliant on Sharon. On the auteurist front, *The Forest* is the third Don Jones horror film to feature a nasty mother: in *Abducted Momma* was an incestuous dragon, in *The Love Butcher* she guilt-trips one son for surviving an accident that killed the other while here she's a two-timing bitch who locks her kids in the bedroom closet while she screws the local repairman, then taunts her husband, "Well, what do you expect me to do? You're practically impotent."

A couple of cheesy rock songs pop up here and there: the first is a feminist rock anthem called *Comin' On Strong* complete with corny lyrics, followed later by a song that sounds like Echo and the Bunnymen fronted by Tony Bennett. Richard Hieronymus's score is functional, and at times evokes just the right combination of sweetness and menace, although his insistence on chasing a simple refrain up and down the keyboard gets annoying after a while. Perhaps my judgement is unreliable though, as I must admit the closing song *The Edge of Forever* has a certain camp appeal, of a sort that would be picked up and amplified in Jones's later *Molly and the Ghost*.

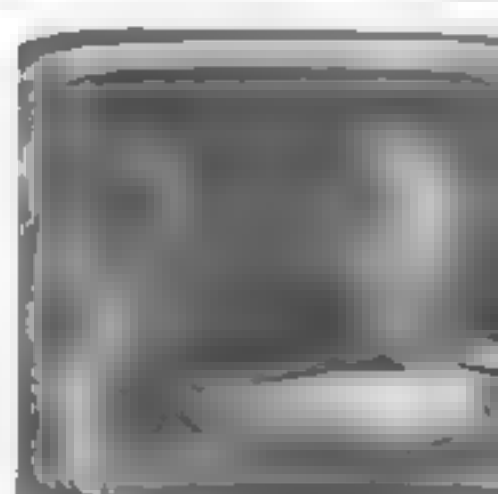
More frustrating than damaging are the plot's unexploited possibilities. We never learn why John has resorted to cannibalism in a region teeming with wild life. And I'm sure I'm not alone in wishing that a few more peripheral characters had been slaughtered, to keep the film's slasher membership paid up in full. (I really am incorrigible when it comes to body counts!) The father's revenge on his wife and her lover – presented in a curious double flashback, only half of which represents information passed on to Steve and Charlie – has a dreamlike quality in which John veers from impotence to omnipotence. His cuckold's reprisal has the bizarrely emphatic feel of a child's revenge fantasy. He strangles his wife and then stalks her lover through the garden, toting various unlikely implements – a giant saw blade, a haybaler's fork – before goring the man to death on the rusty teeth of a mouldering circular saw.

The cast are all perfectly believable in their roles, but the honours must go to Kent, who makes the cannibal father strangely sympathetic. Instead of swivelling his eyes and drooling, he makes him gentle and hospitable, his madness restrained to a slight detachment. The scene where he offers Charlie a bite of his dead wife, Teddi, is one of the creepiest in the film, and it asks a question I don't recall being posed in the movies before: if you ate a piece of your lover, could you tell it was them from the taste? It's a pity that Kent only gets to act directly alongside his own wife Tomi at the end of the film, as she's another strong and credible presence. Which brings me to the head-scratching climax of the movie: John moves in for the kill as Steve lies injured, so Sharon attacks John with a knife, rapidly intercut with John's ghostly wife attacking him too. Quite what this is meant to convey I don't know, it surely can't be equating the two women, one of whom is a total harrier and the other a plucky heroine. Perhaps the ghost is using Sharon's actions as a chance to take vengeance for her own death, but if so, since she has been shown so unsympathetically throughout, we're not really rooting for her.

The Forest is a lighter film than Jones's classic *Abducted*, but there's still a lot to enjoy and it leaves you with a curiously elusive emotional current afterwards. Made in 1981, it feels like a last gasp of seventies-style horror and is more than enough to cement Jones's reputation as one of the best Exploitation Independents of the day.



com-parker Dr. E. A. Jones, who he talks want to do the business supported themselves working for the restaurants and bars at night, as it left the days open for interviews and film work. Jones was an aspiring boxer at the time, a middle-weight, fighting under the name of Irish Frankie Conway. He had done fairly well in the ring, but around as guys in film, he soon crossed over and became another wannabe like the rest of us. He came to L.A. for the opportunities as a boxer, and just got caught up in the whole film world and loved it. He was fairly handy, and I hired him on my stunt and effects jobs frequently. If you needed him to crash a car or fall a horse, he could do it. He was great to work with. He taught himself camera and



Although Don Jones is best known to fans of horror and exploitation cinema as director of the notorious *Girls in Chains*, the man himself is gentle in conversation, relaxed and pleasant, with a dry humor to his character. He's modest and down-to-earth in discussion of his work, he's at pains to stress that his nudies did not comb the depths of porno-excess, and he's clearly even a little sentimental. As a look at his less frequently celebrated horror film *The Forest* will reveal. I'm a big fan of *The Forest* and I would recommend it to anyone who enjoys horror ghost stories with a dash of the red stuff, even the *Polly and the Ghost* is fun, although you may need a little acquaintance with camp to get the most out of that. What emerges from Jones's story is a man who's a hard worker and a hard thinker, who's a man who's never hesitating to make ends meet in a variety of ways, and every few years gathering himself for another stab at directing. Fortunately for us, Jones hit the target near a home, his ventures into the horror genre still have a power to startle and disturb viewers today.

Early Days

Ronald E. Jones was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1928 and enjoyed a happy childhood raised on a small farm about forty miles north of the city. His parents were both born in the United States. "My father was of Welsh descent, and my mother was a typical Anglo-Saxon - Scottish, Irish, English, and German," he says. "My older brother was a bellringer, a professional boxer and race car driver at the same time - but one great guy." Unlike the so-called movie brats, he saw few films as he was growing up, and the man who would come to be known for the exploitation shocker *Abducted* tended to mope in his room. "The closest theatre was ten miles away and went there very seldom, but I suppose that comedies were enjoyed the most. I had no interest in show business, and I didn't, wouldn't have had the slightest idea what to get into it."

In his teens, inspired by his brother's example, Jones embarked on a professional boxing career, but it was cut short by a period in the Army Signal Corps. "The desire to fight had to go before I went in the service had almost disappeared by the time I got out," he explains, "the fire had been banked." In 1958 his parents moved to Florida, Jones opted instead for Los Angeles. "Two things led me into the film business; one, my unemployment insurance ran out and I had to get a job. Fortunately a friend of mine offered me one in the major studios. I actually worked on *My Fair Lady* (1964) as a juicer (cheese slicer). But that only lasted until something called the 'morality program' came in, and two, Gary Kent - whom I met when we were both parking cars, was probably most responsible for getting me into the low-budget film business. When one of us would find out about a job, we would tell the other and the majority of the time we would both work, but it was always hand-to-mouth."

Gary Kent (see sidebar for more on Kent's film career) takes up the story. "Don and I met at a restaurant called The Fog Cutter. I was the doorman, and he was a

REVENGE IS FOREVER



Like many of the directors covered in this book, Don Jones found that the evolving adult film world of the late sixties and early seventies provided a few valuable extra paydays. Rapidly changing and expanding as successive legal developments pushed back the burners of what was permissible pornographic movies sprang from the much less explicit nudies and their darker dramatic offspring the 'roughies'. The nudies were essentially frivolous films exemplified by the debut Russ Meyer film *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959), with glimpses of 'T&A' and scenarios based round nudist camps, holiday settings or strip-joints. The 'roughie' template was set by David Friedman's *The Delinquents* (1965) though it was barely more explicit in terms of the body areas visible. *The Delinquents* added a cynical, aggressive strain of sadism and violence. As the law slowly relaxed, a pattern emerged: one especially bold new film would be made, then, if no prosecutions followed, a flurry of titles in a similar vein would rush to satisfy the punters' new demands, until eventually hardcore was established, and the nudies and 'roughies' with their coyness and suggestiveness, died out.

For a young man eager to run film through a camera, this frenzy of activity in the erotic film arena was an ideal means of learning about the nuts and bolts of moviemaking. "I made a couple of black and white films - easily shows I be sure - where I did everything," Jones says. "It's the best way to learn." The first was *Excited* (1968), which Jones co-directed with the late Gary Graver, who was cameraman on the film and soon became an exploitation stalwart in his own right. Emerging from Ed De Pnest's stable, and handled by Canyon Distribution, *Excited* has sadly proven to be an elusive debut: "I doubt if it's around any more," Jones says, "I haven't seen it in over thirty years."

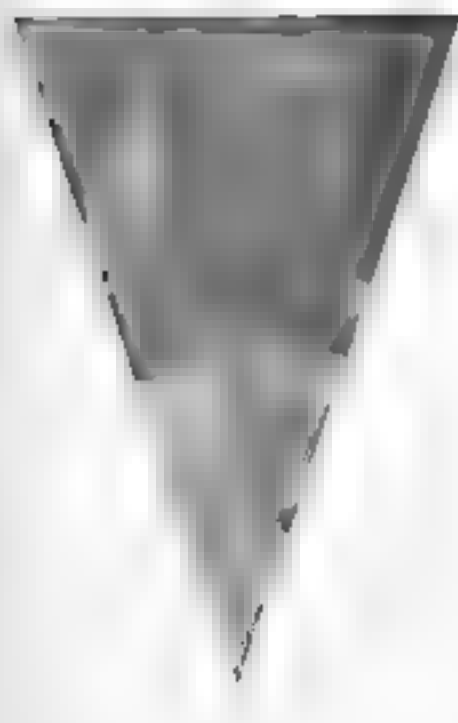
He followed it swiftly with the darker, sleazier *Kiss & Kill* (1968), also for Ed De Pnest and Canyon Distribution. The story revolves around John, a pervert who makes obscene phone calls. Not satisfied with this passtime, he's also a rapist and murderer with a taste for slicing up hookers. Meanwhile a private detective, whose girlfriend Terry works as a go-go dancer, is paid by an irate husband to locate his wife Mickey, who's left him for more exciting bisexual pastures. Mickey has embraced the dark side and is now a committed debauchee. She's also a friend of the killer's. The two of them form a Sadean partnership, and go out looking for kicks. One night they catch Terry's dance routine and decide to follow her home for a rape and torture session.

Jones's next as director was *Who Did Cock Robin* (1970), a detective melodrama about two brothers. It was his first film to be shot in colour. Easily confused with another 1970 nudge called *Who Killed Cock Robin?*

(released by a company called Fleetan Films whose entire output seems to have been made anonymously), Jones's film opens with one man killing another and then throwing him into the ocean off Malibu pier. Jones explains, "This is the death of 'Cock Robin' - the bad brother. The rest of the film concerns the good brother trying to find out who killed him. It's told in flashbacks, as he slowly finds out that his kid brother was a nasty piece of work. Then, when his girlfriend tells him that she was raped by him, he goes under Sodium Pentothal (suggested by the two detectives who are working on the case) and finds out that he was in fact the killer. His psyche had repressed the horrendous nature of his 'Cain and Abel' -er me. It's a little more involved, but I think that's the gist of it. That one was

lighting. Knew very little about acting, so he hired the best he could get, and sort of left the performing up to them. He has that great Welsh sense of irony... It shows in his dialogue. He was a delight to work for, everyone wanted to do a good job for him, whether they understood the script or not, and his work has that improvised look and feel, but creatively so."

Jones's earliest experiences in the industry include work as a gaffer during the late sixties and early seventies, on TV spectaculars like *The Ann-Margret Show* and *Raquel*, along with classroom "educational" and industrial films. "Lighting and camera for some reason came to me pretty easy," says Jones. "The only mentor I had was an old German cameraman who I did a lot of classroom films with, he shot them and I lit them under his direction." Supplementing these paydays, Jones took on stunt work, mainly via Gary Kent, including motorcycle work on *2000 Years Later* a 1969 film by Bert Tenzer for Warner Bros, and effects and stunts on *A Man Called Dagger* (Richard Rush, 1967).



Cagey girl in chair in *Abducted*

gorage cage from top

The *Love Butcher*'s pre-credits victim is
dead

enter Eric Stamm in full flow

Joe lives! Mar. tries to fend off Lester
in the cage

Shawn Ryan: Sherwood is murdered and
placed in the bathtub

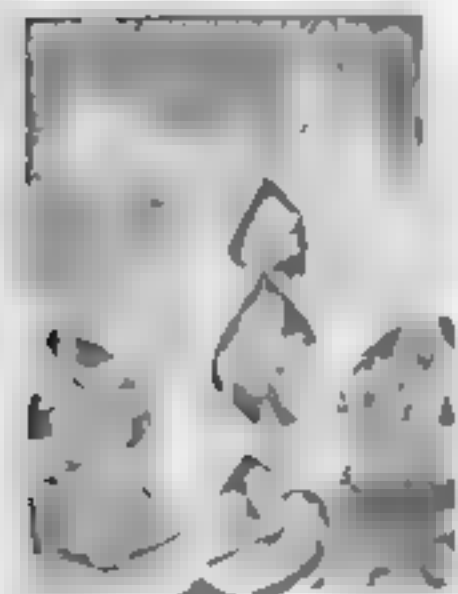
Don't know if added after begging for

The picture pinned to the mannequin that
"Lester" destroys
Cagey girl's letter?

47/4

US one-sheet poster for Jones's *Who Did
Cook Robin?* (1970) – note the misspelling
of *Robert* on two separate occasions! Perhaps

48/45: the cage at the left



in the movie, disliked Cheryl intensely. But the show had to be shot so we put up with what we had to. The rest of the cast was wonderful, cooperative, friendly, and fun. They worked hard. In those days sex was probably looked at a little differently than it is now, and nudity and the strange aspects of the story didn't bother anyone."

Few of the cast can be traced today, as Jones explains: "This was a non-union firm, therefore the actors would not use their real names. Gary and John were the exceptions; they didn't seem to care. I think the mother used the name of Greto Gaylord. If the SAG [Screen Actors Guild] caught them they would fine the performer, and then after a few times they could black-list them. Consequently any actor who worked on a non-SAG show would use a different name. Also as a rule, non-SAG films paid less money. The agents usually didn't care as long as they got their 10%."

When it came to the casting of the two brothers, Jones already knew where to turn: "I'd worked with Gary before, both in stage and movies, and even though the part of Frank was written specifically for somebody else, when Gary showed interest the part was his. He comes off on camera as very strong. John Stoglin was also a friend of both Gary's and mine, and the part was written for him. He and Gary, when they read the first draft, really liked it. When John was crying at the end, when he found his 'mother' hung, boy you should have seen that scene when he did it, everybody in the room was crying. I shot it without sound, which was a stupid thing to do, because he did such a good job."

Kent describes Stoglin as, "A talented actor I met at group, from Clearwater, Florida. He'd been a professional dancer, came to Hollywood to be the next James Dean. He did a lot of theatre work in town, including directing for the Glendale Center Theater, where he won several awards. I've always respected John's unique talent, and I've cast him in several of my films. He's always done a wonderful job, and made his characters totally believable. We talked Don into casting the rest of the show primarily from one of L.A.'s best theatre groups, The Company Theater, so you had these classically trained actors playing very bizarre parts usually played by up-and-coming 'starlets'. We all worked really well together. The usual, some love affairs going on, some smoking of pot, lots of angst and a very serious attitude toward Don's fuck. John and I tried not to get too friendly with the others, as we wanted to remain an enigma to them. I don't know if it showed in the work or not."

Stoglin himself confirms this was the approach: "I liked to stay in character as much as I could, and so I stayed away from the rest of the cast. This was something I developed on my own, as opposed to some actors who like to be very much like personality on-set, talking with the crew and being Mr. Charming and Mr. Wonderful or whatever. I just preferred being somewhere away and it didn't matter where, just being by myself."

While not pornographic, the film's content is still pretty strong, as far as violent and abusive sexual situations are concerned. "Dave Arthur wanted more, and it was a constant battle," Jones admits. "Afterwards, to get the 'R' rating, the MPAA made us shorten one of the scenes. I believe it was the rape scene with Gary – it was really strong."

Thinking back to the shock tactics of early seventies horror, Gary Kent recalls: "Most independents and exploitation films were pushing the envelope a little. After all, in the Big Apple they were showing all of the *Mondo Cane* stuff – so we were actually a little tame in comparison. Nevertheless, walls were coming down, and it was a great

time for breaking the rules! *Playdead* opened at a theatre in San Diego, where it became a favourite midnight movie for the US Marines on duty there. I understand that they still play it now and then, just for old times sake, and the Marines still go and hoot and holler and cheer for the bad guys!"

Jones continues: "I don't know where *Playdead* opened and I didn't attend any screenings. It was not financially successful as far as I know. When Dave Arthur tried to release it, he found that he was in over his head. Distribution is a dog-eat-dog business, and he was not prepared for it. After some time runs he pulled it, and it was bought – at a profit – by Mirror Releasing. Right after, I shot Ron Garcia's film *Swingers Massacre*, and then *The House of Seven Corpses* in Salt Lake City. As far as I know, the director Paul Harrison came from TV *The Untouchables* – and I don't believe he did much after *House*. He died not too many years after making the movie: cancer I believe. A nice guy."

The Love Butcher and Sweater Girls

"*The Love Butcher* is interesting in that whilst its production pre-dates the stalker-'n'-slash craze, its ironic tongue-in-cheek script actually highlights and parodies the gross misogyny of the subgenre." – *The Austin Film Encyclopedia*, *Horror*

In 1975, Jones accepted a job on a classic sleazy seventies opus, *The Love Butcher*. To begin with, Mikel Angel was the writer and director, with Jones hired as DP. "It was originally called *The Gardener*," Jones recalls. "Unfortunately, after viewing the rough cut we all knew that the film was unreleasable. All except Mike, that is. He said, 'Well that's the film' and walked out of the screening room, leaving the producers in a quandary. So they hired me to try and fix it and make it releasable. We hired another cameraman (Eric Austin McKinney), did a little more casing and that's about it. About half the film is Mike's and half is mine. I do have to see it again to remember which scenes I added (see review). I'm sure close to half of the film was changed. The humour was added. The film as originally cut just did not make any sense, and what I remember most was the absolute silence that followed the screening of the rough-cut. To make matters worse, the editor as he was cutting, I had been raving about the film. This was of course before anybody saw it. He also was very disappointed."

With four-and-a-half features under his belt but without a conspicuous hit, Jones found that he still needed to keep working in just about any capacity: "I had to make a living, wives kids, etc. – and I would take anything to make a buck, and that includes sound, lighting, griping, editing, basically anything. By then I was doing very little stunt work, mostly I was working crew, camera, gaffing, etc. Except for shooting another feature called *My Boys Are Good Boys* (Bethel Buckalew, 1978) and some second unit shooting for Roger Corman, I was mainly crew. By the last few years of the seventies however, I was shooting a German TV show, when they came to the States, called *The VIP Show*. Not unlike *20/20* or perhaps *60 Minutes*, but interested more in celebrities. I also shot a fun show travelling through the Greek islands on a forty-metre schooner for German TV."

One of Jones's lighter screen offerings is the period comedy *Sweater Girls*, which he directed in 1977. Written with Neva Friedman, who would shortly find work on *The Trailbox Murders*, and giving seventeen-year-old Charlene Tilton her last role before she went stellar as Lucy in the smash TV soap *Dallas*, it's the tale of a group of girls in the

1960s who swear an oath that they "save themselves for marriage, while the local juvenile delinquents try to persuade otherwise." Jones recalls: "Sweater Girls" was produced by Gary Gibbs, and I co-wrote and directed it. It suffers from lack of money. The story's lame, but the actors are likeable and quite good. Gibbs expected great things from it, and though it didn't do as much as he would have liked, it did have a very nice profit.

The Forest

In 1981, Jones returned to the horror genre with *The Forest*, an under-rated slasher tale that's enlivened by a sudden leap to the supernatural: just the ticket for fans who think they've seen all the 'shoe-and-dice' format has to offer. As Jones puts it, "There don't seem to be a lot of stories about ghost children and cannibalism!" Sadly, *The Forest* was a far less happy experience for its maker. "A shaft job on a grand scale," to be precise. "I was in charge of the ghost children ("Ghosts are not evil," he says, "they can do many things, and I like to think they are off the beaten trail," he says). Jones wrote the script in about thirty days. The movie was then shot in twelve days, in October of 1980, mostly in Sequoia National Park. "It was a pretty dry season up there," Jones remarks. "I put a \$5,000 bond up with the state to burn down a national park, you know? We took the park to ourselves, we did a lot of night shooting, and it was just as alone." Jones not only wrote, directed and edited the film himself, he also shot the Steadicam material for the prologue. The majority of the film was lensed by DP Stuart Ashjornsen, and his photography of this primeval landscape in beauty spot is lucid and attractive throughout. Jones used pseudonyms for writing and editing *The Forest*, so that his name was already prominent enough in the credits. Gary Kent was back on board, this time using the name Michael Brody, because of trouble with the SAC. He plays the cannibal fisher living in a cave in the forest, as although the actual caves used are the famous Devil's Caves outside Los Angeles, well-known for their appearance in countless movies and TV shows, from *Ruben* to the sixties TV series *Batman*. "We had great meals at a little motel, the Blue Bird, inside the forest," Kent remembers. "The people that owned it had just died, and were eager to please. We had gourmet meals every night. Shooting was a blast in all of that beautiful wilderness." Kent also handled the fights: "Yes, I did them. Since Don had hooked his house to make the movie, we had little money for other stuntmen, or fight props, so we make do with whatever we found along the way. I remember the comic bit with the wife's lover was a little bit of the usual fistcuffs of that kind of confrontation, and then him with everybody farm objects: pitchfork, saw, etc. The film also includes Gary Kent's wife Tomi, using the name Elaine Warner. John Huns, Dean Russell, Ann Jeanette Kelly, Stafford Morgan and Marilyn Mason all used their real names, and came to an interesting ending. "Tomy Gee" is the only other pseudonym. Corky Leeson and Becki Burke came from a children's agency. "He was like, she was fifteen. If you can believe it," Jones says. "Come with his other credits on *The Forest*. Jones also appears in the movie, playing the forest ranger. "Never, there was no Hitchcockian reason for this. "I wrote the script, I was the production manager, but because of SAC, he wouldn't do it. I didn't know until we got to the location

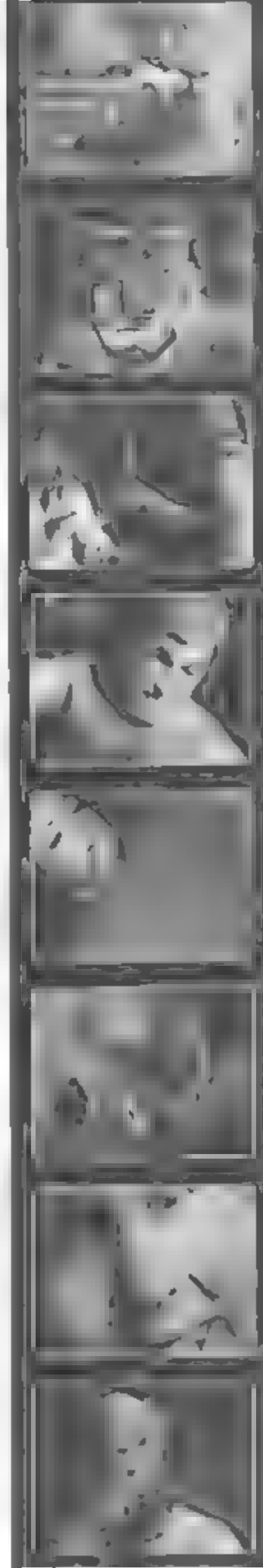
Jones had plans for more scenic shooting around the waterfalls and giant Sequoia trees, but lack of time and money meant they were curtailed. However, when he made a rough cut of the film, he realised it was too short. "What I did was to add a prologue. The beginning, before we meet the protagonists, I shot in Frazier Park about fifty miles north of L.A. The chase scenes I shot with a Steadicam, and not too well, I may add. If I had it to do over again I would not use the Steadicam. The only camera we had was a 35 BL, too heavy to do much hand-holding."

Once the necessary scenes had been captured at Sequoia, further shots were picked up elsewhere. Those at Steve and Sharon's house were shot at the home of Jones's friend Stafford Morgan, who played the baker killed in the prologue, and the house in Gary Kent's cuckold flashback was located in Acton, fifty miles North East of Los Angeles. As told, the shooting budget was \$42,000 into the can. "Not including around \$30,000 deferred, which I paid by the way," Jones stresses. "I'm proud of that. Lost the house but I paid the deferrals."

Jones's unhappy memories of the film are rooted here. "Yeah, that film cost me my house, as I put it up for financing. Since I only had enough money to shoot it and not to finish it, I immediately took a job for Cornman and gave the editing to somebody else who said that he would cut it on spec and who was recommended to me by the composer. While I was working he got busy and gave it to Robert Berk to cut. This clown thought the film was terrible and in his wisdom decided that he would save it. Therefore he chose to tell the story in flashback. I didn't see it until I screened it for Caruth Byrd, one of the richest men in Texas, in an attempt to find finishing money. At the time I had every reason to believe that he would give me ten or fifteen thousand to finish it. After seeing it though he didn't, and don't blame him. It was horrible, the screening was over and everybody's sitting there, not a word spoken. Just a heavy, heavy silence. I took the film back, put it back together the way it came from the lab, which was an absolute pain-in-the-ass, and started to re-cut it from scratch. What a mess. I want to kill the egoistic son-of-a-bitch."

From there, the problems snowballed. "I had trouble raising finishing money. I sold the film to Commedia for \$200,000, which would have been a pretty nice profit for me, well over double my money, but they only paid about \$75,000 of the \$200,000, with which I paid off my deferrals but I didn't pay my house off. I finished it with their money, they released it, (they made seventy or eighty prints but it pretty much failed in the theatres, as far as I know) and then they gave it to a guy named Jon Edwards to sell to video. Prism picked it up and made quite a bit of money with it, none of which, as far as I know, either Frank Evans (Commedia), nor I ever saw. Jon must have kept all the money. The profit was supposed to go back to Commedia but I don't think it did, I think it stayed with Edwards. So I'm one step removed from it, I'm not sure I have any legal

course. The irony of the whole project is that it was originally shot to go straight to video. Frank however thought it could play big screen, hence the prints. Commedia was a penny stock company out of Utah. In reality what Frank wanted to do was drive up the price of the stock and then sell his shares. In later years he went to prison, not for that but something similar. Some kind of stock manipulation. Distributors think that they put it out there and any money it makes should be theirs. I've been through this with every movie I've ever made."



LETHAL PURSUIT

SOME LIVE
FOR THE HUNT
OTHERS.

FOR THE KILL



Lethal Pursuit and Molly and the Ghost

It would be seven years before Jones directed again. *Lethal Pursuit* (1988) is a low-budget, B-movie action flick with nice stunts, and it's fun to see Gary Kent again, albeit in a minor role, but it's essentially the sort of late-night cable TV filler that passes your eyes without your brain ever rising to the bait. The machismo is of that peculiarly eighties sort that has men with bad hair and trashy leather jackets throwing shapes at each other, while chicks with slightly bigger hair prove their worth in a man's world by wearing distressed jeans. *Lethal Pursuit* is the only Don Jones film I felt indifferent to as it played. The element of surprise, of the

pervasive, seemed lost in an eighties mulch. Part of the problem is an extended prologue that takes place at night amongst characters of interchangeable unpleasantness. The film gets cheesier, and thus slightly more fun, as it progresses, thanks to an on-screen romance between good girl/rock-chick Debra (Mitzi Kapture) and psycho-hunk Warren (Blake Bahner), to the dismay of nice-but-dull A John Stuart Widman). It's the sort of film where people say things like "Warren's crazy but the dude ain't stupid, man" in earnest tones that suggest half-nine interviews in TV wrestling have taken the place of acting classes.

Fortunately, *Lethal Pursuit* was a short-lived dip in Jones's filmography. He himself dryly remarks that *Molly and the Ghost* (1991) is "not the best thing I ever did," but

having tracked down a copy. I have to say I rather enjoyed it. Shot brightly and efficiently on 16mm, it tells the story of lascivious teenage tramp Susan (Ena Henderson, in a memorably larty performance: a 'bad seed' who arrives penniless at the posh pad of her sister Molly (Lee Darling). Although welcomed into the house, within minutes she's at it, prying and setting out to seduce Molly's buff husband Jeff (Ron Monarty). Despite Susan's best efforts to replicate Jeff in an adulterous bedroom clinch, Molly remains unconvinced and the couple close ranks against the little mix. Pretending to withdraw, Susan instead psychotically ups the ante by paying a hired assassin (Danie Martine) to murder the stubbornly happy Molly. All does not go according to plan. Due to unforeseen (and rather contrived) circumstances, Susan is murdered instead of her sister but in a twist with faint echoes of Mario Biwa's *Hatchet for the Honeyman*, her hatred for Molly extends beyond the grave. Susan begins haunting the couple, appearing in bedroom mirrors during their lovemaking and generally spoiling the romantic ambience. You want more? How about astral possession, professional ghost-debunkers, and spirit guides?

Molly and the Ghost is way better than I expected, it's like an afternoon TV movie with a supernatural side-order and extra cheese. It has a flagrant, almost Italian tackiness that's found irresistible. It's easy to imagine the film made in the early '60s, with Edwige Fenech as Molly and Erik Blanc as Susan, and some Euro-hunk like Howard Ross or George Hilton as the husband. Susan is such a spiteful little bitch that death and the advice of a motherly spirit guide fail to quell her sexually frustrated stropiness. It's not perfect by a long shot – the title music is so cable-TV soap you almost give up on the movie before it's begun – but a week later I found I was dying to watch it again.

Jones has mostly retired from the film industry today, and spends his time working on novels, such as his

Southern-set ghost story *Mina and the Poltergeist*. It's a shame there's a little vague regarding the early days of his career, and he's unperturbed by the obscurity of his first three films, since he never did return to the adult cinema. We can assume that his interest in these pictures ended as soon as the last metre of film passed through the shutter. However, he's pleased to know that *Abduction* has been cherished and admired, and glad also that *The Forest* has picked up fans on video after its misfortune in theatrical distribution. The exploitation cinema scene that nurtured his best work may have disappeared, but Jones's films will continue to entertain as they find their way onto DVD. And as long as there are people out there who see that alternative title and think, 'Oh my God, they *can't* call a film *Schoolgirls in Chains*!', his name will always be guaranteed some notoriety.



- 1 This film is also frequently credited to Olympic International.
- 2 "The dolls in the credits scene belonged to the woman whose house it was shot in," adds Jones.
- 3 Waters appeared in Max Baer Jr.'s *Macon County Line* (1974) in which she played one of the four leads, a hitch hiker. She also appeared in *A.P. Squad*, a feminist vigilante film from A.P. which is so poorly conceived and executed it actually makes the rape-killer look like less of a dope than the victims, and *Eden* (1971) by Kent Osburne. If these choices represent the director's selection of stence, she was badly advised.
- 4 The IMDB confuses Harrison with his British punchline, a TV director of such fare as *Five-Up* and *Buttchassenger*.



opposite: Press-sheet for Jones's act *Lethal Pursuit*

DON JONES: FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR	
Year	Title
1965	<i>The Forest</i>
1966	<i>Abduction</i>
1967	<i>Molly and the Ghost</i>
1968	<i>The Forest</i>
1969	<i>The Forest</i>
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2022	<i>The Forest</i>
2023	<i>The Forest</i>
2024	<i>The Forest</i>
2025	<i>The Forest</i>



A Visit from Gary Kent

GARY BARBER'S *THE MOVIE MAKERS* is a love letter to the industry that made him famous. The book is a collection of essays that look at the lives of the people who made the movies. It's a book that's as much about the people as it is about the movies. Barber's writing is as engaging as the movies he's talking about. He's a writer who knows his stuff, and he's a writer who knows how to tell a story. *The Movie Makers* is a book that's as much about the people as it is about the movies. It's a book that's as much about the people as it is about the movies. It's a book that's as much about the people as it is about the movies.

I was born and raised on a ranch, in Wulia Wulia, Washington. For me, getting to town once a month and seeing a movie was like a trip to a foreign country. Dad (Art) was a rancher and sheriff, macho to the bone. Mom (Viola) was a homemaker and a writer, a good poet. She was published in several Northwest papers. Four sisters, no brothers. I had my own horses all the way from grade school to high school, rode in some little punkin' roller rodeos, got some applause. Thought I was Gary Cooper and Burt Lancaster, couldn't wait to get out in the big world and find out for sure; so second year of college, I joined the Navy Air Corps. In school, I had my nose broken playing football, so I turned out for the school play, fell in love with Drama and the stage. Hooked!

After discharge from service where I spent two years flying for the Blue Angels Flying Team, I did radio and theatre in Texas, where I had been stationed with Headquarters Flight Unit. I tried out for the Playhouse Theater in Houston, and was signed on as the juvenile lead for a season. I did a number of plays, including Shakespeare, and even directed a couple. The ingenue lead was Katherine Helmond. When the Playhouse ended the season, I grabbed a Greyhound bus for Los Angeles to see what movies were all about. Worked several jobs—private detective, bouncer, parking cars, etc. Finally wangled my way into a job in the mail room at Allied Artists Studios, and bugged everybody till I got a job doing some rough riding on a George Montgomery western, *King of the Wild Stallions* (1959). They gave me one line to say, and that got me in the union. I was off and running. Did three more flicks at Allied before we parted ways. At night, I belonged to several acting groups. The town was full of young, antsy and artsy actors from all over the spectrum, and much of the good work was being done at night, in the little theatres and acting groups. The studios were still pretty much of a Star Search kind of operation, and, frankly, behind the times creatively. The groups had Jack Nicholson, Harry

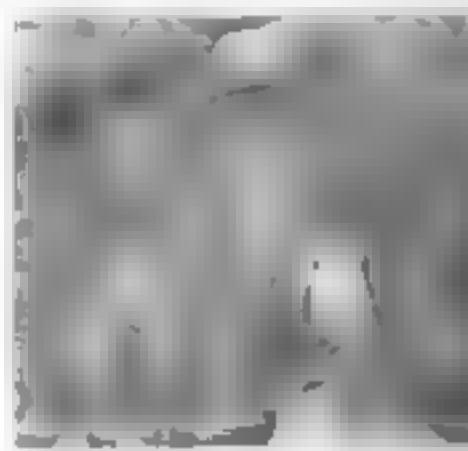
Dean Stanton, Bruce Dern, Monte Hellman, etc. We were all young and too naïve to take no for an answer. A great, vital time to be young and in Hollywood. We just made up our own rules.

Devil Wolf of Shadow Mountain (1963)

I made friends with a stuntman actor named Bud Cardos. He had this script, *Devil Wolf of Shadow Mountain*. Bud had always wanted to play The Wolf Man, and this story was about a young rancher who is bitten and infected by a devil wolf. It was somehow decided that I would direct it, having had the most film experience. (After all, I had worked in a mail room!) We shot quite a few scenes. Bud was great in the part. However, about halfway through, the producer, a horseman named Johnny Carpenter, ran out of money. We shelved the project. That was it, until years later I heard that Carpenter had gotten completion money, so he shot some pick-ups and released it. I have never seen the completed work, but I sure fell in love with film work getting it started. Bud Cardos has no knowledge of a completed film, either. Johnny Carpenter was known for working with disabled and blind children, for which he was much admired. Film-wise, he was a bit of a rounder, a scammer and schemer, but (kable... a jolly fellow who felt that he and John Wayne were the only early cowboys who looked bad in the saddle. Johnny Carpenter was about five foot five. The photographer was Lewis Guinn, sound recorder was Bob Dietz, and as well as I can remember a fellow named Beau Wilson did Bud's makeup. Beau was related to the famous Westmore make-up dynasty. John (Bud) Cardos is a good friend, although we see each other much too seldom. Like all of us old stunt guys, he has a few aches and pains but is otherwise hale and hearty. He lives in the San Fernando Valley, and keeps some horses and mules or property out in the mission hills. He still owns the rights to *Devil Wolf of Shadow Mountain* and has talked about re-doing it some day.

Lock up your daughters! Gary Kerk in his 2008 press tour

As the grizzled family-man turned corner
in The Forest 45





Forest

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Monte Hellman's *Ride in the Whirlwind* (1965),
and *The Shooting* (1967)
Richard Rush's *Hells Angels on Wheels* (1967),
and *Psych-Out* (1968)

I heard there were a couple of westerns going to Utah, and that they were looking for stuntmen. When on the interview, I told them I was a stuntman, and I got the job. Jack Nicholson and Monte Hellman had put the deal together with Roger Corman. Paul Lewis was the production manager. We became good friends, and that was the start of my work for A.P. as Jack and Paul were A.P. regulars. The pictures we shot in Utah, *Ride in the Whirlwind* and *The Shooting*, have become more or less classics. Besides Jack, they had Warren Oates, Milic Perkins and Cameron Mitchell. The assistant cameraman Gary Kutz, later became a producer for George Lucas. I was Jack who hired me as stuntman on *The Shooting* and *Ride in the Whirlwind*, so I have known him for some time. He is a fairly handy guy, and easy to stage action with.

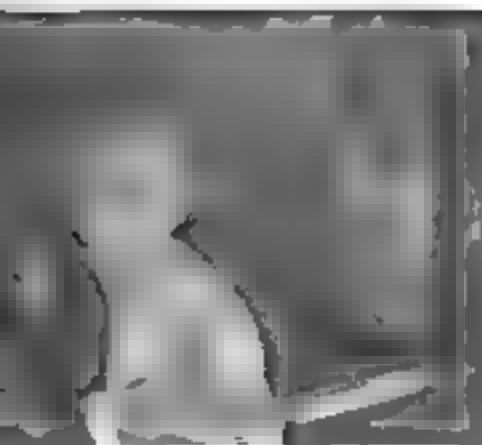
Dick Rush would always let his stunt coordinator decide where and when regarding fights. This allowed me to be constantly creative. In *Hells Angels on Wheels*, I showed a theme in each fight: a Pier 6 donnybrook in the bar, Roman Coliseum in the swimming pool (Christians and lions, bikers and rednecks), running the gauntlet when the sailors came off the merry-go-round. So on *Psych-Out*, I just asked Dick, since we're gonna be in the junkyard anyway, I've always wanted to stage something there: a hot metal, and rot, I guess. Dick said yes, and I just took my guys there, stacked some cars, and a few props, etc. The stunt guys sat in the master-shot, then Jack and Adam [Roarke] did the close-ups. Jack was always a dream guy to double, as he would watch the fights and repeat even the body language. He always approached his work very seriously, putted little except with his current love alone somewhere. After the day's shoot, you wouldn't see

him and I more. Didn't drink, and back then he didn't smoke, except for pot. Loyal to his friends, loved his work.

There were, for me, certain directors who always raised the bar a little, both in treatment of their cast and crew, and overall artistic content of their films. Richard Rush was me, the top of that list. Frequently, when you don't have the time or money, then real creativity and inventiveness is called upon. I can recall the joy of being the 'special effects' man on *Psych-Out*, where I was asked to design had trip on acid (the fire sequence) and have a little girl vomit up "black ooze." I finally hit upon the combination: chewed liquorice, backed up by a side shot of Sheer dirty eagle, squirted into a grease gun at a 45-degree angle. The combination of the two was amazing, and served the purpose perfectly. Ah, the magic of it all.

Targets (1968)

I belonged to this acting group, and Peter Bogdanovich showed up as a possible director for one of our projects. He lived in a little house out in the San Fernando Valley, his wife at the time, Polly Platt, (an enormous talent in her own right). Peter had done some editing for Corman, and got the financing for this little film he and Polly had written based on the Texas Tower shootings. Polly had been in Texas when a fellow named Charles Whitman climbed to the top of the school tower and began shooting people. He killed sixteen before the police killed him. So, Polly and Pete wrote *Targets*, loosely based on that incident, and also, making a statement against guns. Peter remembered me from the group and called me in. Paul Lewis was his production manager. They hired me to play the oil field worker and do all of the special effects. I did all of the shooting in the film, including the big shootout in the drive-in at the end. The film was a good project, with many who went on to bigger things in the industry. (Lazlo Kovacs, Paul Lewis, Frank Marshall, Mike Farrel)



Swingers Massacre (1973)

I came on the picture late. I was in Seattle, staying with natives, and recovering from a love affair gone south by drinking a whole bottle of excellent Scotch. I got a frantic call from Ron Garcia. An actor had to drop from his film, and Jonesy had suggested me as a replacement. Could I come back to L.A. right away?

I am not a fan of Ron Garcia as a film maker. I respect and rather fancy him as a cinematographer, but film maker? No. What sold me on the film was the idea that I would get to do a lingering death scene inside an automobile with the camera pretty much on me. Now, what actor doesn't want to do a lingering death scene? It's part of our hopes and dreams, isn't it. I remember this strange little fellow, Dave Arthur, who was the producer, and his wife, the writer, who hovered around the set, convinced that this would be a "winner." Mr. Arthur had made some sort of deal with Ron and Don (two pictures for the price of one, I imagine). I did not know the rest of the cast. The strange and creative thing that occurred was when one of the actresses blew her fuse at her co-star, insisting that he had acted like a slob, and in doing so, had ruined a perfectly good love scene. Those fireworks remember and also that it took Ron Garcia forever to get a day's filming done. I was supposed to work two days, then return to Seattle and that bottle of Scotch. Well, Ron's days were longer and more tedious than his ultimate product. Two days stretched into four 22-hour days, cast and crew reduced to going through motions. No wonder the film is a bore. Wish I had more to offer about the whole thing, but I was just in and out, so to speak, and have never really seen the entire film. How was the car scene? Bloody awful. I'll bet

The House of Seven Corpses (1973)

Paul Lewis, who was now working mainly as a producer, began to recommend me for Production Management jobs. This was one. We took the cast and crew to Salt Lake City, Utah, where we had taken the Mormon Church into letting us shoot in their Historical Society. Everyone in Salt Lake treated us great. The film was directed by Paul Harrison, (writer of *H.R. Pufnstuff*), and had a strange little star, John Cazale and John Carradine. Ireland was into "smoke", and rolled those funny maryjane cigarettes and passed them around. Carradine was strictly a drinker. Every night, after shooting, he would shower and dress for the evening (suit and tie) and adjourn to the bar, where he would drink for hours and tell these incredible funny stories about his years in show business. He was a crowd pleaser that's for sure. Paul pretty much let me run the show, and I actually brought the picture in under budget. A first!

Phantom of the Paradise (1974)

I had just finished working stunts on *Freebie and the Bean* in San Francisco, for Richard Rush. I was anxious to direct. I got a call from an acquaintance in Dallas, Texas, asking me to come down and direct a movie for him. I got there, and found he did not have the money. I took an apartment in town, as my love relationship had just gone sour back in L.A. and I decided to stay in Dallas and get a movie going (*The Pyramid*). While working on the script,



The cast and crew of *Phantom of the Paradise* partied hard.

I got a call from Paul Lewis. He was bringing Brian De Palma to town for *Phantom of the Paradise* and wanted me to help him on production. Brian hired me. Paul got in an argument with the producer, Ed Pressman, and quit. I inherited the production end of the film. The picture was in absolute chaos when it arrived in Dallas, no one speaking to anyone, no pre-production done, no sets, props or locations. Anyway, I put together a group of Dallasites who jumped in and helped me get it done. We had a ball trying to make Dallas look like New York.

A New York and L.A. crew stuck in Dallas over the Xmas holidays... whew. Everyone was into a strange and personal scene, being away from home on the holidays, stuck in this redneck southern town. We partied hearty, trying to keep spirits up. Everyone bonded at the Christmas banquet, which Paul Williams, the lead, had catered. A veritable feast—duck, ham, turkey, yams, grapes, the best wine and champagne. He was a class act and put on a class dinner. After that evening, everyone got along pretty well, although we all caught the flu, and passed it around like popcorn. It seemed there was a doctor constantly on the set, giving everyone vitamin B shots and Vicodin. Brian De Palma was a perfectionist who kept to himself and communicated with only a few members of his crew. We had trouble getting information from him regarding the schedule. A quiet, intense man who believed in Olaya boards and the like. Did not have much of a sense of humour, but knew his camera angles. A good filmmaker, but I don't think a crew-person would feel comfortable having a laugh with him.

The Pyramid (1975)

At dinner one night back in San Francisco, one of the stuntmen on *Freebie and the Bean*, Al Wynt, told us he had just returned from Egypt, visiting the pyramids. The dinner turned into a delightful discussion of all things mystical. The conversation and excellent Merlot fingered

John Cazale and John Carradine in *The House of Seven Corpses*.

THE HOUSE OF SEVEN CORPSES





• obscurity. Kent's
 • can film The
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long after the evening ended. Remembering this, I sent a friend of mine some money. Tom Kelly, who had written *The House of Seven Corpses*, and asked him to write me a low-budget script. "What about?" says Tom.

"Oh, I don't know, how about something about pyramids and mysticism?" Well, Tom took the money and smoked a lot of very nice ganja, but never wrote a tick. The *Phantom of the Paradise* group returned to Hollywood, but I stayed in Dallas, convinced that, with the group of kids I had put together, I could make my own movie. I just had a script. Since Tom didn't get it done, I decided to write it myself.

Now being an actor in Hollywood, who also does stunts, you are usually the bad guy. You know "Thug #1" or "Thug #2" and the films you work on are usually violent. I decided that, as a filmmaker, I wanted to try something different, something nobody else would even attempt. I wanted to do a very personal film. I sat in my little Dallas cubby-hole apartment and started writing. I soon found I had no real interest in the *Pyramid*. Power had. I am neither a scientist nor mystic, but I was very open to positive forces, and needed to do some examination of my own inner consciousness at the time. I was on my own quest, so to speak, and decided to see if maybe I could encapsulate a fictional story into the process, and come up with a new and unusual film. This energy drew to me a variety of real mystics, scientists, spiritual gurus and nuts of all varieties and persuasions. I was introduced to astronauts, neuro-psychologists, people that talked to plants, etc. I cast some of these real people to interact with the imaginary characters. Ed

Mitchell, sixth man to walk on the moon, plays himself at the observatory. This was more or less a first. I talked them all into being in the film, threw them into the pot along with some music and stunts (I couldn't resist).

Then Gregory Peck's son committed suicide in a Santa Barbara TV studio. And a woman news anchor in Florida had actually done herself in on camera. Since I had at one time been a young news reporter, I knew some of the pressure there was to dwell on the sensationally sordid, or the sensationally insignificant. I looked up the word 'pyramid', found it translated as 'fire in the middle', and decided, well, then, there's my story: a reporter who has grown tired of the usual crap, and takes his personal quest and nose for news into the forests of consciousness, whatever that turned out to mean. Sort of a Siddhartha of an American Newsmen.

When I started looking for money, whom could I nowhere, the phone rings. An old friend from Sacramento, Mike McFarland. He had some money and wanted to make a film. Would I be interested? Now, what are the chances of that happening other than in the movies? It was not much money, I had to shoot the film on a nickel and a dime and a lot of favours. But the film got made, and along the way an incredible amount of unusual and mystical happenings occurred. Not just to me, but to the cast and crew. Some had their lives changed positively, and many developed a deeper awareness of this interconnected universe.

The main lead in the film, Charlie Brown, was shot and killed in a liquor store robbery before the film was out of the editing room. Charlie had just dropped in to run the cash register for a friend, who wanted to go see his girl. Two unknown assassins robbed the store, and needlessly shot Charlie in the back of the head. The female lead, Tomi Barrett, became my wife.

The Pyramid was a late entry at the Cannes Festival in 1975, but still got rave reviews and made several sales. When I told the suits this film was about consciousness they said, "Huh?" But I can guarantee you that in Houston, in 1975 for thirteen weeks, *Pyramid* was the hot ticket for new agers, stoners, bikers, intellectuals, film folk, etc. That alone made it worth the effort. At the USA Film Festival in Park City, Utah, (now Sundance), *Pyramid* won best of category, Documentary. We signed a deal with a distributor, and the film opened in Dallas, San Antonio, Houston, etc. It got rave reviews. Ed Mitchell was flown in and given the keys to the city of San Antonio. Then I learned the distributor was dealing with the numbers. I sued him to get the film back. The case went to trial, took a year. I won, but by then I was broke and on to other things. *Pyramid* sat in my garage for twenty some years, until a film writer for the *Austin Statesman* happened to see it sitting there and asked to see it. I set up a screening, crying because the film was so long in the tooth. Well, he loved it. It became the opening film for an Austin Film Festival fund-raiser, and sold out the house. Then Doubleday made an offer to put it out over the internet, and at last, it's getting an audience.

Gary Kent is currently working on his autobiography *Shadows and Light, Journeys with Outlaws in Revolutionary Hollywood*, a volume that should be on every self-respecting film fan's must-have list.

Louisiana Screamin'

James L. Wilson & Richard Wadsack on
Screams of a Winter Night

Screams of a Winter Night (1979)

Released in 1979 and distributed by Dimension Pictures, the entirely named *Screams of a Winter Night* was made in Natchitoches, Louisiana, far from the usual film centres of Los Angeles and New York today, in a film market where sensation and excess reigned supreme. It blows in like a sepulchral draft from a distant age, when a horror story could safely take its toll building its scares. It has its flaws, as with any low-budget film, but they're offset by a gradually thickening atmosphere of supernatural menace. The film was aimed at teen-agers, so goriness and overt violence are not part of the package – however, as a scary campfire compendium for younger viewers, made before teenagers were familiar with such well-oiled death machines as *Urban* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, it has charm to go with the chills. It's also perhaps the only compendium of film in which the wraparound tale is the best part of the show, bundling up into a genuinely unnerving climax that must have sent its young audience home with their teeth chattering like phone wires in a high wind. A group of ten friends take a weekend vacation in a remote place called Coyote Lake, so-called by the Indians for the strange howling winds that scour the area. As a light-kids John (Matt Borelli), a horror fan and social joker determined to exploit the creepiness of the area, tells the group a story about 'The Moss Point Man', a monstrous wood-dweller whom a local girl and her friend were reputed to have encountered when their car broke down in the woods. John's friend Steve (Greg Kinnear) joins in, with the tale of a hell-bent lumberjack in a nearby haunted house. Distracted by the best stories, no-one notices that the wind has begun to howl. Elaine (Mary Agen Cox), unimpressed by the spooky tales so far, recounts the story of a psychotic 'girl next door' who embarked on a killing spree after a sexual assault tipped her over the edge. This unnerves the already jittery group, who by now can no longer ignore the howling wind outside. The intensity of the last tale spills over into the room. As the party descend into hysteria, violent forces tear at the lodge, exposing the scare-stories with a terrifying reality.

Screams of a Winter Night starts out as a fairly routine genre excursion but builds up in its second half into a



SCREAMS OF A WINTER NIGHT
 Matt Borelli & Greg Kinnear star with Mary Agen Cox, John D. Hayes, James L. Wilson, Richard Wadswick, and Jimmy L. Hayes
 Directed by James L. Wilson
 Screenplay by Richard Wadswick
 Produced by James L. Wilson
 Distributed by Dimension Pictures

1979



From top
Marissa Redorta in the second segment of
Screams of a Winter Night.

Opposite page: strip of images from top
of *Amber* plays a nice quiet girl who's
about to die.

Terror in the night in the first fireside tale
in the *Amber* tale: a girl's encounter with a
monster over triggers psychosis
A *Wendy* scene: the murderess's rage

sense supernatural suspense. The onset of conviction arrives a tad too late to completely salvage the film's reputation, but it's nevertheless strong enough to pluck it from the mire. Originality isn't of the essence here: from the get-go, this unleashes a classic scenario that's part *Snooby-Doo*, part *Wendy Tales*. The collection of rural grotesques who gather round the van when our gang of happy campers stop for gas are straight out of *Deliverance* (except for cute William Ragsdale, who eventually became a star in *Fright Night* six years later), and the hints of an Indian curse on the woods ensure the tale resides squarely in the comfort zone of seventies horror and it's not get too snobby about comfort zones, after all they're frequently visited by royalty – Stephen King would be lost without them. Clearly we're not going to face anything too challenging or disturbing here, but you can't watch *The Last House on Dead End Street* every night, can you? The fact is, this is simple fare: bouncing merrily up and down the scale between hackneyed and thrilling – if the sight of a camper van driving through sinister woodland to a remote decrepit cottage in the woods gives you a pleasurable frisson of expectation, you'll find there's some good creepy fun to be had.

The problem for a modern audience is that you have to be patient to get to the good stuff. The structure of the film is potentially ideal for an incremental series of scares, escalating from schlocky fright-stories to out-and-out supernatural terror. But after an innovative and genuinely unnerving opening (we hear the previous occupants of the lodge die in terror on the soundtrack, played against a black screen), and the arrival scenes mentioned above, the first story-within-the-story pays off so minimally it's a drag on the rest. There's an obvious commitment to the art of suggestion (gore is entirely absent) but such a vow of chastity requires a great deal of imaginative investment: fear and madness are fine spectres to call to the table, but they need a little more energy than *Screams of a Winter Night* initially possesses. Too much time is wasted on creeping around in the dark.

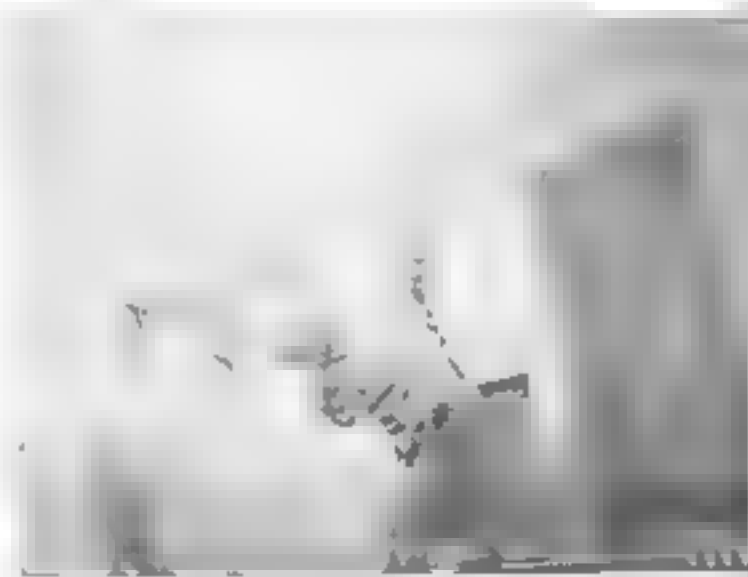
However, as the football pundits say, this is a game of two halves. (Actually, three halves with a wraparound, but that doesn't sound quite right...) Once the tide turns and the film begins to cook, it all gets distinctly alarming, and the actors do their utmost to crank up the tension. Granted, the girls are the main focus of terror: in fact female hysteria is so intense towards the end that you'd be well advised to turn down the treble on your TV set. But sexism be damned, not all women can be ass-kicking Amazons. In fact the shocks are so well marshalled in the final scenes that afterwards you come away with a vastly improved impression of the picture than you would have admitted earlier on. (I wish George Romero had seen this, because if ever a 'portmanteau' horror film needed a better wraparound, it's *Creepshow*.)

One of the film's best ideas is to have the actors in the wraparound story play the characters in the other stories. As well as making good use of the available cast, giving each actor a second bite of the cherry, it makes sense in a diegetic sense too: those listening would quite likely visualise the tales using their friends' faces to fill out the sketchy stories. You can imagine this technique paying off beautifully in a Fassbinder tale of warring couples regaling each other with mean vignettes at a party; and it's worth squirreling away for future reference if you're thinking of writing a low-budget script.

Story One, 'The Moss Point Man', is about as basic as a horror story can get, featuring some kind of Bigfoot in the night – the very dark picture on video does the episode no favours at all. Story Two, although hackneyed as hell, works itself up to a sucker-punch creep-out finale that brings to mind the end of *The Blair Witch Project*. With its reliance on a big build-up to a shuddery last image. A fraternity initiation dare to sleep overnight in a haunted house is accepted by three friends. After two have gone missing while exploring the upper reaches of the building, the third sets off to see what's become of them, and after much tenseness and shadows, apprehension, he opens a door to find... well, something haunting and subtle and likely to scare you at bedtimes if you're a twelve-year-old with an overactive imagination. There's still enough of a thrill to this to please me now, but I just know this would have left me afraid to close my eyes at night if I'd seen it when I was young – in its horrid implication it feels like a moment from a Robert Aickman story, in which the horror is so understated you can almost, but not quite, miss it.

Mary Agen Cox is excellent as 'Elaine', the cynical odd-one-out, who mocks the ghost tales her friends have been telling, and offers in their place Story Three: about a sexually repressed girl turning psycho after an attempted rape. Beverly Allen acts out the role most convincingly with shattered innocence turning to puritan bitterness, and it's also a relief to see what Wilson can do with scenes shot in daylight. Her performance segues into the wraparound story, where Matt Borel's 'John' is still giving us the classic nerdy horror-freak, always going too far with his practical jokes. For a fan of the slasher subgenre, 'John' is an old friend, and it's easy to imagine Borel turning up in much the same role in *Madman*, *The Burning*, *My Bloody Valentine* or *Final Exam*. He's distracting and enjoyable enough to act as a sleight of hand manoeuvre when the scares begin to ratchet up in the final scenes. The wind rises, whips up the hysteria, and you may find yourself wondering quite when the film got so scary – a neat piece of narrative construction. As for the destructive finale (see it, the cast really go for it with some impressive shrieking and panicking, and rather surprisingly the whole thing works just fine without a giant optically-composited thongamajig pulling in an appearance).

There's enough going right in *Screams of a Winter Night* to make you curious about what Wilson and Wadsack could have delivered next. Sure it's a bit shaky on its feet at times, but it's a fine calling card to the industry. It's really too bad the industry never got the message.





New Orleans (Place of the Paw-Paw) is the oldest permanent settlement in Louisiana. A small, but historic town, it was founded in 1714 by French colonists to promote trade with the local Indians and the Spanish in Mexico. Thanks to its status as an early river port, it played a key role in the commercial development of both Texas and Louisiana: goods, including livestock, deer hides, salt and tobacco were shipped by river from Natchitoches to New Orleans. Expansion occurred after 1803, when the Louisiana Purchase, often referred to as 'the greatest real estate deal in history', almost doubled the size of the United States: 828,000 square miles of what was then called The Louisiana Territory were bought 'for a song' from the French for \$15 million. Thirteen new states were carved from land stretching East-to-West, from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, and South-to-North from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border. Natchitoches grew rapidly as Americans rushed into the area, introducing cotton plantations along the Cane River. However, in the 1830s, the river shifted its course about 10 miles east of town, leaving Natchitoches without a direct outlet to the sea except at high water. What remains today is the Cane River Lake, a beautiful, meandering body of water about thirty-two miles in length, flowing through downtown Natchitoches and on to the Plantation Country. The original inhabitants of the region, the Choctaw Indians spread across Louisiana throughout the late 18th and throughout the 19th Century, sometimes displacing other smaller tribes, and refusing to be swept away by various treaties designed to shut them off to the Oklahoma settlements.² Their influence can be felt in *Screamers of a Winter Night*, with its wraparound tale, drawn from Indian legend, of a powerful wind that springs from nowhere.

The Louisiana Cavaliers

The writer of *Screamers of a Winter Night*, Richard Wadsack, was born in San Antonio, Texas in 1946, but brought up in Shreveport, Louisiana, where his father, a decorated, decorated officer in the US Air Force, was based. It's a town he still lives in today. "Neither of my parents graduated high school, but my father was one of the most intelligent people I've ever known and my mother strongly encouraged me to take interest in all kinds of music and the performing arts," he recalls. "One of my earliest memories is of our outings to the Louisiana State Theatre, located at the Municipal Auditorium here in Shreveport. Slim Whitman lived about four blocks from our house in the early 1950s. I have a photo of myself backstage with Red Sovine." Wadsack's father, not your average career type, enjoyed a brief stint in showbusiness: "He left family's Kansas farm in the 1930s, looking for adventure, and joined the Floto-Tom Mix Circus, as groom of a Max's wonder horse, Tony. When the season ended, he joined the Army."

Wadsack's earliest movie memories are, "a jumble of scenes from cowboy pictures and scary jungle films in

which the natives were generally something well beyond monkeys, snakes, lions, quicksand and a host of other dangers loomed large. My earliest intact memories are of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Thing* and *Invaders from Mars*. Most of what was on movie screens of my youth was more movie than distraction, but those pictures compelled my attention, and they stuck.

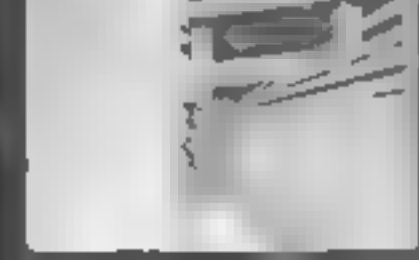
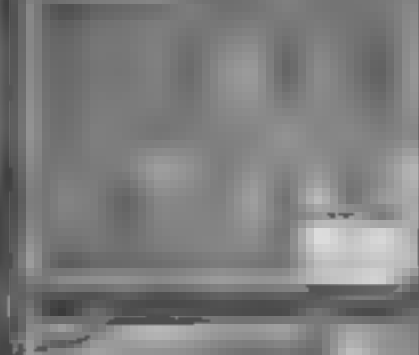
After graduating high school Wadsack went on the road for a while, playing trumpet with a travelling lounge band before deciding to give college a try. Six-and-a-half years later, he'd earned a BA in History, and the question of what to do next arose once again. "I had no idea. I thought advertising might be an all-right job, if you had to have one, and I eventually landed a position with a small backwater ad agency. Then, a fellow I had met in college became lead executive for an outdoor historical drama that was starting up in Natchitoches, and I conned him into hiring me as its public relations director. I also persuaded Jim Wilson to come to work for the theatre. I joined my freshman year at school and we had become friends. I wasn't having much fun when he was at the time, but I was in for the theatre. The play,

Louisiana Cavalier, was written by Paul Green (1894-1981), a North Carolina born playwright who had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1927 for his play, *An American Tragedy*. Green, whose plays frequently spoke out against racial prejudice, lynchings and the brutal chain-gangs of the Deep South, wrote *Louisiana Cavalier* in 1976, and it received its Natchitoches outdoor premiere in 1977, but by then Wadsack feels, his glory days were behind him: "Cavalier was just awful, so far as Jim and I were concerned, and we began working out what we thought would be great improvements, and conspiring together on how to get them introduced. A crazy notion, of course, and our schemes went nowhere. For reasons not limited to the script, the play's first season was a disaster.

James Wilson, the director and co-producer of *Screamers of a Winter Night*, was born in 1947 in Shreveport, Louisiana to a middle class family background. "Our family's creative interests tended toward music," he recalls.

Two sisters and I sang in trio, did family events, church functions, etc. from time to time. Wilson began to take a serious interest in movies while at college, came of age in the late sixties/early seventies, a remarkable time for cinema. Films like *Midnight Cowboy*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *McCabe and Mrs Miller*, *M*A*S*H*, *A Clockwork Orange* moved away from mere entertainment and explored unlimited possibilities and a whole new way of looking at movies. After a couple of years of false starts in college, he discovered the theatre department and the performing arts. He moved quickly into directing, and in the last couple of years directed a half-dozen plays and several film shorts. Super-8 silent things, cops and robbers, car chases. After school, my first job was as director of an Arts Centre in Arkansas. The centre housed four arts organisations: a community theatre, symphony orchestra, ballet company and art league. The major part of my job was to direct five theatre productions a year. As a stage director, I took a serious interest in stage design and lighting.

With their joint experience in theatre production, Wilson and Wadsack were keen to apply their learning to something more permanent. Wadsack recalls, "One night my wife and I were visiting Jim and his wife at their home, all of us drinking wine and talking about our future, and the absence of future prospects. At some point, I



Charles B. Pierce (Texarkana director of *The Legend of Boggy Creek* and *The Town That Dreaded Sundown*); Joy Houck and Jim McCullough (respectively the Louisiana-based director and producer of *Creature from Black Lake*); Harry Thomason (Arkansas-based director of *Encounter with the Unknown* and *The Day It Came to Earth*); and Cliff Blackburn (the producer of *The Day It Came to Earth*). "I knew there was a good bit of independent production going on in our little region of Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas," Wadsack says. "Charles Pierce was an advertising executive who had scored big with *The Legend of Boggy Creek* and gone on to semi-respectability with *The Town That Dreaded Sundown*—the McCulloughs here in Shreveport were grinding out a series of family-friendly features, and the lovable dog vehicle, *Benji*, had made a bundle for Joe Camp in Dallas. There were at least a few other operations in Arkansas. Why not us?" Wilson agrees. "We decided if they could do it, so could we. We started an advertising agency to support us while we figured out how to finance and make a movie."

The most helpful local advice, according to Wadsack, came from Bill and Cliff Blackburn, two brothers from Arkansas. "We learned a whole lot about the details and pitfalls of theatrical production. They had hit every snag in the road, and were generous in sharing their experience and know-how with us. We learned that many more movies were started than were finished—and that it's a hell to complete and hell to try to find distribution were the greatest risks facing investors." Wilson, though also an executive, found some of the Blackburns' wisdom memorable. "Bill and Cliff Blackburn advised us: 'Shoot on 16mm and blow up to 35mm so you can shoot lots of terrific advice: for a number of reasons, the main one being you spend a lot of time shooting stuff you don't need. The industry average was a 10:1 ratio, and we were probably pushing a 10:1 ratio instead of a 2:1 ratio. For every hour of film you might spend four or five, and then when you get into the editing, you're taking, and at the level we were working, the ratio between them was, frankly, negligible."

"We did, however, find some of their other words of advice valuable." Here an experienced production executive and start him well in advance of shooting advice. In fact we took up Cliff Blackburn for advice. And, "If you had any idea how hard this was going to be, you wouldn't do it," we figured that was true, but we did it anyway."

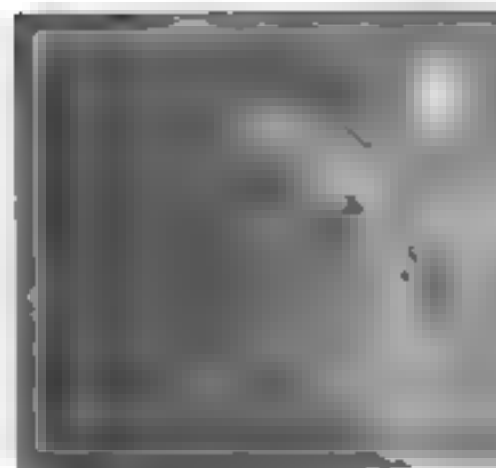
Cliff Blackburn introduced Wilson and Wadsack to his friend Harry Thomason, who invited them to observe the making of a monster movie he was making in Little Rock, Arkansas, called *The Day It Came to Earth*. They stayed around for a few days but left feeling they'd seen enough. (See the review of Thomason's *Encounter with the Unknown*.) Wadsack also met up with Joy Houck Sr., who owned several theatres in Shreveport and New Orleans. "I didn't know until I met Joy Houck Sr. that the names of a downtown theatre and a drive-in here in Shreveport derived from anyone's name. I spent some time at both of those theatres and always assumed that the Joy Theatre and the Joy Drive-In were named in the spirit of what their owners hoped for their audiences. Definitely a better choice than Rex, Venus, Saenger, Strand, Don, etc.—the names of other local theatres, although I'd have appreciated them more had I known future movie theatres here would be called Tinseltown, Easycat

Multiplex, Bossier Cinplex 9, etc." When I visited the old man at his offices in a seedy stretch of Airline Highway in New Orleans, he showed me lobby cards of pictures he had produced in the 1950s. *Poor White Trash* is the only title I can recall, but they were all of the exploitation variety. It took balls to produce something called *Poor White Trash*, I can tell you, certainly in the South in those days."

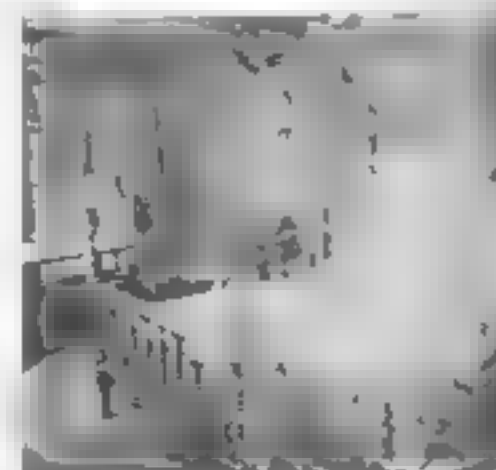
After brief meetings with Houck's son, Joy Houck Jr., director of *Creature from Black Lake*, and local-boy-made-good Charles Pierce, whose hit *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* had been picked up for nationwide distribution by AIP, the duo felt they were cranked up enough to begin seeking finance for their own stab at the big time. Wadsack had already written the finished script early on to secure funding. Now it was time to go looking for the money. He describes the process: "From the start our business plan included completion insurance and funding for a test market. I reasoned that if we could show prospective distributors real-life box office receipts, we would eliminate some subjectivity and greatly enhance our chances—and our position from which to negotiate. I also figured that if we could succeed in reaching distribution with our first picture, we would position ourselves to move on, and learn how to make better movies as we went along. And our research revealed that, without question, the genre in which fledgling, low-budget filmmakers were most likely to be successful was 'horror.' So that was the kind of movie we needed to make. This businesslike approach seemed most likely to appeal to investors, too, and after many dead ends and missteps, we found S. Mark Lovell, a wealthy real estate developer with sophisticated tax savvy and the cash flow to fund the entire cost on his own. The sex appeal of backing a movie, and the potential for huge profits, certainly appealed to Mark, and once we had convinced him that we had our act together and had eliminated every possible cause for failure—after many meetings and his own research—he said 'yes.' That was a pretty damn happy day!"

"We were introduced to Mark Lovell through a family connection," Wilson explains. "We pitched the movie to him, and after several months of consideration he agreed to finance the entire project. As best we can figure, Mark saw it as a trial project, which, if successful, he could resell to his investor pool. But that's speculation; there's really no sound explanation. How a couple of kids from Louisiana who had never made a movie in their life were able to talk grown men into giving them several hundred thousand dollars to make one remains a mystery!"

So, with Lovell's financial assistance in the bag in 1977 or very early 1978, a total budget of around \$300,000 was nailed down; pretty respectable for a small regional feature. Wilson recalls: "We had about \$250,000 for production and another \$50,000 for test marketing. That budget allowed us to do some things that we really thought were important. One was to have an original score recorded for the film. That cost six or eight grand. We knew there were a lot of sound effects, so we spent a lot of money there, and we went to Ryder Sound Services in L.A. to do the mix. We paid everybody, on time, we didn't ask for any deferrals, and we paid ourselves—not a lot, but we paid ourselves a salary. I've seen productions round about here in Shreveport, and they ask everyone to do it for free, and they get a buddy to do the audio, and they've got sixty thousand dollars, to pay for the film in the camera."



Terror grips the holidaymakers at the end



This beautifully crafted Gothic image greets one of the gang as they explore the dusk

The title was *Screams of a Winter Night* from the get-go," says Wadsack. Like the story, it was marketing driven. We started with the legends and then sorted out the wraparound storyline within which to create a unified rather than anthological piece. Two of the legends existed in oral tradition and were widely known in this region of the US, and the activity – young couples getting together to frighten and titillate each other with tales of teenage

was very popular. Our original tagline, *How do you think those stories get started?*, played that up, and promised to legitimise it.

We had a specific market in mind – one that research said did a lot of movie-going," Wilson explains. "We knew we needed a PG rating to have access to that market, and at the time the rating system was still very conservative. So we were deliberate in avoiding graphic violence, drugs and sex."

'How do you think those stories get started?' shooting *Screams of a Winter Night*

Shooting took place during the summer of 1978, as Wadsack recalls. "It took over a year to reach funding, and about fifteen months from when until we broke the test market release. The principal filming spanned five or six weeks, I believe. Three weeks, then a break of a week or so, and then a final week's shooting." Wilson remembers a slightly longer schedule. "We shot a total of nine weeks shooting, then breaking for a couple weeks, coming back for all the MOS shooting, pickups

Everything was shot on location in Natchitoches Parish," adds Wadsack. "Having gone to college there and lived there, scouting and securing locations was one of the main aspects of the whole show for us. Most of the script was written with specific locations in mind. Grand Ecote Bluffs, where the crazy girl murders her overly-ardent date, has been a favourite make-out spot in the area for decades. There was a long-abandoned hotel in downtown Natchitoches. The dormitory was a dormitory on the local college campus. The cabin and much of the

production was located around nearby Black Lake. The horror tale like this. The performers in *Screams of a Winter Night* from his cast are mostly above average. He shot the main scenes first, filming the cutaway stories afterwards, so for the most part all ten of the main cast were on the set together, which helped to develop an ensemble feeling. Wadsack recalls, "I wrote John and Cal, the characters portrayed by Matt Borel and G. Glasgow with them in mind. They and Ray Gasparo

Harper"] were cast members for *Louisiana Cavalier*'s premiere season. Jim knew Beverly A. Jen [Jockie] from his stint at a community theatre in Arkansas and we cast the rest of the main players from Dallas and Houston.

Borel, in an interview with local paper *The Times Picayune* in 1979, explained. "Jim Wilson and Richard Wadsack asked members of *Louisiana Cavalier* to send resumés for a film they were putting together. What they had been doing was quietly watching us. They wrote the characters for us, so there were lines that sounded like things we would say. It worked out well." Of his employers, he said. "They're total collaborators, low partners, to such an extent that it makes some people uncomfortable.

The decision to use the same actors in multiple roles

Wadsack explains, "was probably motivated more out of practicality than sprung from inspiration. We had quite a small budget, and with as it was, and none of them objected to the screen time. There was some concern about possible confusion, but the device made dramatic sense – that, in hearing the stories, listeners would tend to relate personalities in the stories to similar ones they knew or who were telling the tales.

Two alumni of *Screams of a Winter Night* went on to mainstream success. Handsome young William Ragsdale who plays a country-cuzzin garage attendant at the start of the film, found fame in *Fright Night* (1985), the vampire horror-comedy, and its sequel. "I had been working as director of an arts centre in Ft. Dorado, Arkansas," Wilson remembers. "Anna Bill was in my children's group up there for about three years. I think he was about fifteen. He just loved acting so much that created a part for him. On the crew side, sound mixer Ron Judkins has climbed to the top of his profession, in Hollywood terms, as sound mixer (recording the production sound on-set, for Steven Spielberg, having worked with him on *Minority Report*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *The Terminal* and *War of the Worlds*).

With production in full swing, Wadsack and Wilson experienced the thrills, the pressures and the horrors of low-budget film shoot. "There was a night shoot for which the dailies came back so underdeveloped they appeared not to have been processed at all," shudders Wadsack.

Then there was a crew revolt – a stoppage over the slender variety of fruit juices and drinks served during breaks. One night not long after we had secured the financial backing, the old downtown building in Natchitoches in which we officed burned to the ground. As for props and wardrobe, the production board, set records, fires, new furniture, many precious personal items. As gone. Jim and I both lived within walking distance of the office and generally left everything there. I happened to have a script home that night, or there would have been nothing left at all. On another occasion, law enforcement showed a remote location where we were filming the scene in which the boy is hung up over the car with his terrified date inside. Some local happened to catch a glimpse and assumed the worst was going on. There were near fistfights between gaffers and sound for a while in their age-old battle for supremacy. Arguments and insults. Accusations and recommendations. Stress breakdowns and anxiety attacks. The usual stuff. The helicopter pilot we hired for aerials, and to make our wind, announced assembled cast and crew that should they hear the helicopter engine stop, they should seek shelter immediately. Add to that the brutally long days and the awful heat and humidity – summers in Louisiana are not kind or gentle. On the other hand, many very happy moments when scenes were completed successfully, and the very strange feeling when filming was finished, and cast and crew departed.

On set, tension began to develop between Wilson and his director of photography Robert E. Rogers. "Bob Rogers was experienced, but not at shooting. There's an enormous difference between shooting industrial and commercial features. He knew the technical end, but the technical is not necessarily as important as the dynamics and the dramatics, or at least that's the conclusion we came to. I felt conflicted. I didn't have an experience, but I felt a shot needed to be done this way

hat way. I was just going on youth and instinct, but he was saying no, no – it needed to be done another way. At the same time I had my producer ‘head’ on and, you know, cinematographers are notorious for wanting to spend days achieving a shot. Fortunately I connected with Mark Beasley, the camera operator, and by the end he and I were more or less running things, and Bob was overseeing. I’m sure we didn’t get into serious trouble. Mark had a great eye, and a good sense of movement and composition. I’ll be shooting it anyway, while Bob was the director of cinematography and lighting. In Bob’s defence, we didn’t have the time to give him the script and let him go over it. He showed up, and two days later we started shooting. He didn’t have a choice.

Wilson’s over-riding memory of the production period is the strain of knowing that so much money was riding on his efforts. “Virtually every aspect was a serious challenge, because neither Wadsack nor I had any experience whatsoever with a project like this. Add to that the pressure of spending seven hundred thousand dollars on a movie that was a man who was fully expecting to get it all back and more – and we slept very little during the year. We were confident throughout that *Screamers* conceptually would work, and that it was an okay marketable scary movie. We were less sure how to get the concept on film and then make it all fit together more or less coherently. Having directed almost fifty plays by this time, I was fairly confident working with actors. Beyond that, the organisation, the scheduling, planning the setups, lighting, sound, continuity – all the technical and administrative demands – were almost overwhelming at times.”

Post-Production and Test Marketing

Post-production went on for a further six months, with the editing taking three-and-a-half to four. “I’d describe the editing process as miserable,” says Wilson. “I had a three-year-old son, and we were living in Natchitoches and editing in Dallas, so I was away from home for almost four months. Secondly, we had an editor Gary Canote who was experienced in industrials and commercials but did not have the experience editing a full-length dramatic film. This was fluffed editing, you had to paste every cut we were in this darkened room for fourteen to sixteen hours a day. We began by giving Gary a director’s cut, but the first sequence he cut together was not at all what we were thinking of. I felt I had to step in and take over the direction of the editing, relegating him to a functionary, and that’s never pleasant. I understand his point of view here’s this kid that’s never made a movie before telling him to do this and that and this and that. The second editor credited, Craig Mayes, he was a young man who came in about two weeks before we finished it and did a polish job, and he really did some things that made it nice.” Wilson pauses, then laughs. “Looking back, Gary was probably cutting it right! I was stuck in that thing of ‘character is important’, so we would let scenes play out as written, whereas he wanted to get in and get out of it and move on to the next thing. On the rare occasion I look at it now, I think, ‘Boy this thing drags!’ At the time, I thought it was maybe a little too fast!”

Wadsack hated the editing too. “I stayed away, mostly. I worked with Don Zimmers on the music and I did enjoy that. There wasn’t much work to it, for me. Don had done well for years as a composer-arranger of music for



commercial and an occasional pop or country recording session. He was truly excited about scoring a movie and got quite a lot out of a relatively slim budget. We did the final sound mix and effects at Ryder Sound in Hollywood, and that was very enjoyable.

Originally there were four ‘legends’ in the test-market edit of the movie, the fourth being

involving a malevolent witch-spirit. Wilson explains. “The distributor, Dimension Pictures, told us that our two-hour film had to be cut to about an hour and forty minutes. They said that movie houses needed to run features every two hours in order to get maximum showings per day, and they needed a twenty-minute break between showings to clear the theatre, to get the next group in. They cut an entire story – a twenty-minute story that took place in a cemetery. It was shot day-for-night for budgetary reasons. The result was fairly low contrast footage, and our distributor said that since this movie would be played a lot of drive-ins, the ambient light at drive-ins would make this footage hard to see anyway. Plus, it was the corniest of the four stories, though no one said that outright.”

(Although this section was cut for the Dimension-distributed version, and for its various video releases, it still exists in the original 35mm print owned by Wilson.)

Wilson’s last sighting of the film was in 1982, when he saw it in its entirety for about three years. “I haven’t watched it in at least twenty. I don’t need to, I remember it pretty well. My favourite moment in the process was the movie’s opening in Shreveport – one of our test cities. We had no idea what to expect. Would anybody show up? What would be the reaction of whatever audience appeared? Nothing to go on but hopes and fears. I was a nervous wreck and Jim decided to opt out. Deborah and I took my parents. We were eager to see the picture and wanting to be supportive. I was shocked at the line in front of the theatre. We had to queue up for nearly twenty minutes to get inside, and the 400-plus seat theatre was jammed to capacity. It was thrilling, sitting there in the dark, that audience packed around us, all jolting in their seats, squealing, laughing in the appropriate places. And then sitting, talking at mutedly among themselves, as they faded out about a scene or a character they liked. The faces of the next crowd, waiting for the next showing, anxiously watching the demeanour of the departing groups and growing eager to go in. At the car, my Dad told me: ‘If nothing else good ever happens to you for the rest of your life, you got no complaints coming. He was dead right. I did the James Dean thing from *Great* for about a week – in a rich boy, I’m a rich one! Hopping around and giggling to myself. When the reports came in on the first week’s box-office, danced some more. It was held over on every screen and played for six weeks in three of the towns. The theatre owners were delighted, too. Life was sweet.”

An adman that

ACCVB

opposite page: strip of images from the climactic wind instils fear and

Elaine (Mary Ager Cox) The window explodes Elaine gets a faceful of glass Steve (Ged Glasgow) finally meets

the end of the world



Wilson concurs. To a youthful audience, twelve to fifteen, at that time, in a darkened cinema, the film actually was suspenseful. It seemed to work well with that audience. We were told by our distributor that we should have shot additional graphic footage for the foreign markets, but by then, of course, it was too late."

Wadsack is behind him, immediately to the left. Wadsack is 4'4". Deborah is to Wilson's right. Dr. Bachman, advisor to the film, is in the front row far left. Sound mixer Wadsack is left of Deborah. Bill Cherry can be seen in the front row, left. Lead actor second row, third from left.

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"Are you sure you want to hear about distribution?" Richard Wadsack

And so, after the film is done, comes the all-too-familiar tale of hopes ground into the dust. We headed to L.A. with a print, our pocketful of box-office reports, and high expectations," says Wadsack. "We had enough money to hire the top Rodeo Drive entertainment law firm — Mark Lovell had insisted on that. By coincidence, our test market had coincided with the full national release of the original *Halloween*. Our numbers compared very favourably. Gee, I was sure I was gonna be rich. After a week or so, we had only gotten a serious bite from one mid-level distributor (Dimension Pictures, not the same company as today's Dimension Pictures), and we eventually came to terms with them.² I wasn't completely happy, but they guaranteed at least two hundred prints and \$150,000 in initial promotion — and there was no question they had the connections to place the picture. Especially if it performed well, as was expected. They had the rights-sales contacts, too. Mark was satisfied. *Screamers* hit No. 25 on Variety's "50 Top Grossers" chart the first week out of the box. It stayed on the chart for a while, too, and had over four hundred prints working at one point (Chicago, Philadelphia, Houston, Los Angeles, Portland, Miami, Long Island, Albuquerque, Indianapolis, Cleveland, St. Louis). The numbers were good.

He pauses. "They screwed us, of course. Ironclad hotshot contract or no. The movie grossed at least \$8 million domestically and sold cash deals in those days to over a dozen primo overseas markets and to the just-

starting-up Showtime Movie Channel. We collected a total of a little over \$17,000. I actually threw a chair across their offices on a visit to the coast, when it became obvious they had put it to us. I was able to sort out what they'd done with a good bit of the money — used it to roll out four other pictures, all of which flopped heavily. Trying to break upwards in one big leap, and tumbled. But they could not have been as calm about events as we hadn't stashed a bunch away before they declared bankruptcy. It was good that I did not own a gun. Mark Lovell finally won the domestic rights back in court, but we knew that meant nada. I popped up in strange packaging in video stores for years and I'd hear from someone now and then that they'd seen it advertised as part of a drive-in bill, or in some small town with a stupid independent hardtop. While the picture hung on the chairs, we could get in to see almost anybody in

Hollywood, and we saw several. But we didn't get any offers or opportunities to make movies. We got offers to line-produce small-budget pictures. Which was something, and we knew that, but I didn't want to do that. It wasn't just breaking in to the biz. I was interested in I didn't particularly like the business. I went a little depressive for six months or so, and then we moved back to Shreveport. I was a census taker for the 1980 US Census, and then I got on with a small but very professional ad agency. I've been doing advertising and marketing consultation work ever since. And the education I received from my experience with *Screamers* — creatively, people-wise and business-wise — has been of no small value.

James Wilson and Richard Wadsack worked together for a few years after their movie-making ambitions were so unfairly curtailed, and they still see each other once in awhile. "We were going to do two more low budget films," says Wilson. "You need leverage, and one way you can get leverage is by having some product flow. We understood that, but we were still dependent on Mark's money, and I think he decided these were not the waters he wanted to be swimming in, so he did not fund a second project. If we had gotten a bite on one of those other projects we would have continued, but it got to the point where I had to make a living. I had a wife and child, I didn't want to go to California. I had writerly ambitions so I went into the newspaper business for about seven years. I stayed in Natchitoches and became editor of the local newspaper. Now Wadsack and I each have our own small ad agency."

Richard Wadsack still has fond memories of his brief spell in the movie industry, and takes a philosophical attitude to the corruption he encountered: "You know, I learned that, in the distribution business, 'theft' begins at the ticket window and continues right on up the line. It was as rough-and-tumble a racket as production, and equally risky, or pretty close to it. Indie theatre ownership was no piece of cake. When I drove town-to-town, selling our picture to theatres for the test market, realised those guys loved the movies. I don't think any of them got rich. And I'd don't even have a print of our movie yet — just the scenario, our promotional material, our planned media schedules and our promise to deliver print and do the advertising. They risked a week in which they might not have had, essentially, 'product on their shelves' — or they could have suffered a dramatic decline in popcorn sales. If nobody showed up wanting to see the



movie. We offered a pretty good deal — we did all the promotion and they didn't have to pay a penny in return up-front for the print — but the romance had to be a big part of why they bought into the thing. That — and there being so much other product coming down the pike in January, when traditionally it's quiet distribution-wise — indie distributors and, most importantly, independent theaters and small chains, had as much to do with the quality and eccentricity of those times, as filmmakers. All the folk I met who were doing what we were doing had in common an obsessive drive and a hyper sense of consistency in terms of getting their picture made — mixed with the soul of a pirate. Most were poor as church mice like we were — and I never met a single rich kid hanging around in the movie game. There must have been some, but I only saw them sprinkled in with cast or crew people.

Despite the hardships and disappointments, Wilson has fond memories of the filmmaking experience — “I was doing at the time exactly what I’d imagined I was supposed to be doing, although I did not imagine it could be so damn hard. Still, it was about as much fun as a human should be allowed. I have no regrets about it — indeed, my kids think I’m cool because I once made a movie. So it seems it was all worth it.”

FACTS OF THE MATTER

- 1 “Let the Land Refugee” is a 1903 silent film starring Gen. Horatio Gates to President Thomas Jefferson in the signing of the Louisiana Purchase Treaty, July 18, 1803.
- 2 Source: *The Historic Indian Tribes of Louisiana from 1541 to the Present*. By Fred B. Kuitert, Horan F. Gregory, George A. Nikes.
- 3 Both men are still married to the same women. Deborah Wadsack was script supervisor on the movie and Mar Sue Wilson was the set and wardrobe stylist.
- 4 Shreveport is close to the border with Texas and Arkansas, approximately seventy miles from Texarkana, and two hundred miles from Dallas.
- 5 Dimension distributed quite a few low-budget films, including S.F. Unwerriq’s *Sermon of the Earth*; Ford and Beverly Schachtel’s *Center Heat*; Consulting Engineers & The Rocker’s *Son of Satan*; John and Patricia A. Quinn’s *The Victim*; John and Patricia’s *Ruby*; Tom Mann’s *Exotic*; and *Getting Even*.

Author: Robert R. ...
 Jokee (Beverly Allen) Harper
 and Liz (Brandy Barr)
 ...





The Career of David Durston

Let it be known, sons and daughters, that Satan was an acid-head. Drink from his cup! Pledge yourselves! And together we'll all freak out!" — **Horace Bones.**

The charismatic and dangerous Horace Bones (Blaskart) and his travelling retinue 'The Sons and Daughters of Sados' - Robin Yates (George Patterson), Sue-Lin (Jadine Wong), Sylvia (Iris Brooks), Molly (Renua Fulter), Shelley (Aick Mann), Carrie (Lynn Lowry) and Andy (Tyde Kierney) - have been camping out on the edge of a small town. During the night, Horace conducts a black magic ceremony in which the group strip nude and take LSD, but the ritual is interrupted when Horace sees a local girl (Ariane Farber) spying on the group from the trees. Andy, one of the less committed of the group, explains that he's been taking time out from hellraising to pursue a romance with her. Horace sets his man on the girl - she returns home, beaten and traumatized. The following day the group arrive in town. It's almost deserted: most of the population have been moved out to make way for a forthcoming dam project. Among the few remaining residents are the girl's veterinarian grandfather Doc Banner (Richard Bowler), and Pete (Riley Mills), her twelve-year-old brother. The gang occupy an abandoned, ramshackle hotel, and go looking for something to eat. The only place in town that's still open is a small bakery run by Mildred Nash (Elizabeth Murrer-Brooks), who caters to the construction trade. Horace and his pregnant partner Molly buy meat pies and return to their new lair. That night,

Durston gets things off to a great start, with Bhaskar (pronounced Bash-kar) delivering Sawanic mumbo-jumbo in front of a roaring campfire. The title music sets the mood perfectly, helping to define the film's cocktail-shaker blend of horror and sly send-up. As the story gets under way, the tone veers wildly between shuddery scare tactics and comic touches—for instance, as the loopy Rick makes her escape through the woods. Clay Pits's score has more in common with Nelson Riddle's music for the series *Batman* movie than the customary horror themes of the day. As Doc Banner and Mildred discuss what's happened to the poor girl, Durston—on the surface at least—plays the plight of these "normal folk" sympathetically. And yet the acting—especially by Elizabeth Marnier-Brooks as Mildred and Jack Damon as Roger, her super-square lover—has an earnest, melodramatic, daytime-TV quality, so although there's clearly some investment in these people and their plight, it's as if the sardonic attitude of the Satanists is beginning to seep through. No one labels the squares as





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author of *Drink Your Blood*

piggies (instead, one of the group daubs the word on Shelley), but you can't help feeling detached from the squeaky-clean 1960s 'normals' represent.

So the maniacs are far more interesting and compelling than the regular folk? I know, hold the front page. It wouldn't be the first time in the horror genre. Yet, when Bhaskar and his trailer-trash girl friend Molly go to the pie shop, sarcastically adopting a polite bourgeois manner, Mildred swallows their ironic performance without a glimmer of suspicion, and responds with country generosity not only selling the pies but also smiling, "I threw in a few cakes, on the house." "The Lord will bless you today, the Lord will bless you," mocks Bhaskar in pseudo-courteous manner. Now you find yourself irritated with the arrogance of the Satanists. "So what's it to be? wild side or mild side?" I'll spare you the rest of this battle between my inner Satanist and my inner Ned Flanders, although it's worth mentioning that this seesawing of sympathy is part of the way the film is written. It tosses you back and forth between the two sides, giving what could have been a simple horror tale an amusing sort of giddiness. The wildly varying tone of the film means we're always catching our step. Remember though that despite the blood and gore and dismemberment all of this is achieved within an essentially light-hearted framework. As Bhaskar says to Doc Banner when the old man sees the unconscious, blood-dripping Shelley strung up

from the rafters: "I'm surprised you're taken in by all this you see. We are a theatrical group, and we were rehearsing a horror scene that we perform in the theatre."

Nothing better conveys the arrogance and sublimated aggression of supposedly peace-loving hippies than the practise of spiking "straighties" with LSD. ("God, I sound so square.") "You're pretty yummy for a dirty old man!" Have a breath freshener, handsome!" says nympho hippy-chick Sylvia, as she doses Doc Banner. It's perhaps a shame that Durston opts not to show the old man's hallucinations, but actor Richard Howler makes his bad-trip scene work anyway, as we see him sobbing at the kitchen table holding the salt and pepper shakers to his head like horns. "Heavy trip, dad."

In a script full of great ideas, Durston's stroke of genius is to have young Pete inject meat pies with rabid dog's blood, a wonderful, malevolent notion so typical of a child's thought processes (children are The Devil's best disciples, after all). Unfortunately, young Riley Mills is the weakest link in the movie. There's something snug and porcine about him, which is a shame because I'm generally all in favour of children taking vengeance on adults (see *Devil Times Five* or *Bloody Birthday*). Instead, Mills has the snappability of a *Bullseye* character, a sort of truculent self-righteousness that had me hoping instead that Horace Bones would sacrifice him in the name of Sados.



of course, with a charismatic performer like Bhaskar in the role, it's no wonder we like the villain. The actor's his performance with so much *joie de vivre* than I'd have of acted wires and run the klieg light. He's impossible to dislike, and the laughter we can hear from his eyes is the best advert for Lucifer the Light God a LaVey could wish for! Horace's lieutenant has to burn too. George Paterson as Rollo Yates has a coming to din-dins! he smirks, referencing Kramer's 1967 race relations drama, as a smiling or leering man stuns himself and his scenes thanks to 'Satan was a Black Man' highlight the ages of casting two strong actors in the group. It really makes for it relishing his third scenes and one of the film's many iconic images: a handsome eyed black man foaming at the mouth and totting around who's coming to din-dins indeed! With a nation riding high at the time, America's urban gangs were ideally cued up for this, and the racial mix, Satanist group—headed by an Indian man, a black and an Oriental woman—must surely have struck a chord. A double-bill of this and *Fight for Your Life* would make a great weekend. Jadine Wong's character Sue-Lin may be from a comic-strip vision of the inscrutable Orient, but she's still a great presence. Her role as provocateur is a valiant one when she wordlessly directs Rollo to the unconscious Shelley by placing a Tarot Death card on him, and it's particularly cool that she's the only one of the coven able to suppress any glimmer of pain or shock. Later, when she chooses self-immolation rather than letting the crazed Horace Bones to kill her, Durston is clearly drawing on the infamous action of Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk who burned himself in Saigon in 1963 in protest at the Vietnamese government's suppression of Buddhism (A *New York Times* reporter who witnessed the event wrote afterwards, "As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in contrast to the wailing people around him.") Last but not least, the stunningly beautiful Lynn Lowry turns in a performance that's one of the most memorable of the film, her inimitable spaced-out demeanour to a showdown where she attacks a woman with an electric carving knife, then wanders off absent-mindedly carrying the victim's severed hand. Her appearance here for Durston, with her knockout performances in David Lynch's *Strangers with Candy* and George Romero's *The Crazies*, has cemented her position as one of the iconic faces of the genre. Technically, *I Drink Your Blood* is well constructed and nicely shot, with vividly photographed night scenes, only a weak spot in low-budget horror and only the boom-mike shadow in the brighter interiors to give away the haste of the shooting schedule. Durston's experience on fast-track TV productions must have helped a great deal, and his ability to fuse sound film craftsmanship with a understanding of how to make the horror format work is evident throughout. *I Drink Your Blood* arrived before the heels of the media frenzy surrounding the recently executed Manson cult (who were reputed to have practiced black magic, as well as being bold in viscera terms), it's one hell of a busy stab at topicality. Manson, arrested in October 1969 and charged with the Tate-Byrne murders on 9 December '69, was finally found guilty in January 1971, *I Drink Your Blood* hit theatres just a few months later. Although the passage of time means we can now view the film as fun entertainment, on its release the



Manson resonances and unusually extreme graphic violence must have sent quite a shudder through unsuspecting audiences. For the rest of us jaded gorehounds, many years later, *I Drink Your Blood* is marbled with black humour in a way that forestalls criticism. While the violent excess that made the film so shocking in '71 has been overtaken today by the gore and grisly in mainstream movies, Durston's wit and the charm of the cast protect the film from the ravages of time. Today's young audiences, on the lookout for stereotypes and kitsch naivete, may find, perhaps to their surprise, that *I Drink Your Blood's* sly humour impedes the sort of viewer superiority encouraged by postmodern horror films. With the exception of some exchanges between the less interesting (i.e. 'good') characters, the dialogue and performances forge a sneaky, complicit relationship with the viewer, teasing and amusing us without stepping out of context. Energetic, infused with the liberating vitality of the truly tasteless, yet driven by real intelligence and wit, *I Drink Your Blood* is David Durston's blood-drenched gift to horror fans. I really can't think of a better way to get a Halloween party started!

Durston on *I Drink Your Blood*
 'She's still alive, won't you? She was a...
 She never complained...
 the famous...'

Stigma (1971)

"Put[s] a cast-iron boot on Hollywood's traditional pussyfoot around the subject of venereal disease." – *Variety*

Will wonders never cease? *Stigma*, a screen warning about venereal disease, turns out to be not a mindlessly flapping sermon but a cracking good suspense melodrama. [It] is not a pretty picture. But it packs a vivid, crunching wallop that may do good where it should.

Howard Thompson, *The New York Times*

Doctor Calvin Crosse (Philip Michael Thomas) is released from jail after serving time for performing an illegal abortion. He heads for St. Bernard's and on the invitation of his former teacher Doctor Thor. On the way, he befriends Bill Waco (Harlan Carr Poe), a soldier returning home from Vietnam. However, when the two arrive on St. Bernard's, the locals are hostile to Calvin, who is black. At Doctor Thor's house, he discovers the old man dead in an upstairs bedroom. Sheriff Whitehead (Peter Onorati), a racist cop who comes to investigate, makes it clear that Calvin is unwelcome on the island. Calvin finds a tape-recorded message from Doctor Thor warning of an epidemic sweeping St. Bernard's, but the tape runs out before the nature of the problem is specified. Calvin goes to visit Bill, and his girlfriend Dee-Dee Whitehead (Josie Johnson), the sheriff's daughter. Bill tells Calvin he needs to do something to 'win over' the town. The following day, Bill calls Calvin to the jetty saying that his younger brother has been pulled unconscious from the water. When Calvin arrives and administers the kiss of life, he realises that the boy is alive and well – the set-up is a fake designed by Bill to impress the townspeople. Calvin is furious but masks his feelings,

realising that the strategy has worked. That night, a weird old man, lighthouse-keeper Jeremy Burke (William Magerman), comes to the house seeking help for a 'mysterious affliction, which proves to be syphilis. Under pressure from Calvin, Jeremy claims to have had sex with someone called Tassie (Connie Van Ess), who runs a country brothel just out of town. Cal and Bill drive out to meet Tassie, and her girls, Kathleen (Kathleen Joyce), Jeanie (Jean Parker), and the educationally subnormal Rhoda (Rhonda Fuller aka Ronda Fultz). But when Calvin at last persuades them to undergo a health test, he finds nothing amiss. So who is passing the disease around town?

When you hear that the director of *Drink Your Blood* followed up his 1971 gore classic with a film about VD, your stomach tends to quail at the prospect. Those of a squeamish disposition will survive the experience however as long as they go to the john about a third of the way in, just in time to miss some gross-out scenes from a manual clapper educational short about syphilis. If you're made of sterner stuff, of course, you'll just hunker down in your seat, thank Fros for antibiotics, and admire the director's willingness to momentarily drain the fun from his movie in the name of public health. But apart from this brief medical shock-reel, and a close-up of a spinal injection, the rest of *Stigma* is less of a visceral assault than its predecessor. It's actually a well-written mystery-thriller that's as much about bigotry as venereal disease – and Durston works a neat trick by combining the two themes, associating the festering moral squator of small-town racism with dishonesty, disgust and infection.

Durston's script makes telling points about racial prejudice without leaning from the pulpit, for instance by showing the difficulty Cal has in hitching a ride compared to Bill, his white buddy. In fact the only way Cal can get a





The first thing you notice in conversation with David Durston is his wicked good humour. Ask him where he was born and you're quite likely to be told, "in a trunk at the Princess Theatre" before the man takes pity and admits "No, that's Carland's story. Excuse me!" The next thing you detect is a generosity of spirit, laced with an occasional bluntness, suggesting both the wit and the warmth of a man whose career in film and television has spanned some sixty years. Add to this the skill of a born raconteur and it's obvious this chapter could easily have been twice the length. So without further ado, let's start at the beginning, with Mr Durston as our guide.

David Durston
"My nephew John Durston was introduced to me by Seven Summits Group behind him, with mustache and before that famous time call the Red Cross."



by borrowing Bill's spare army uniform, suggesting that we have no time for black people unless they've accepted their lot as wartime cannon-fodder. It's a point John Moore was still having to make thirty years later (*Fahrenheit 9/11*). Thankful Mr Durston is careful not to cast some sort of saint who suffers insults without reaction. His barbed tongue ("It's enough to make a man lose his faith in Jesus!") ensures the character doesn't sink into the passivity that passed for dignity in 1940s race dramas. Cal's confrontation with a slow-witted cop and his verbal trouncing of the repellent sheriff have all but the most pathetically comic of women assisting with the hero.

There's something almost Sirkian about the film's 'rush moral' set-up, although Durston has problems with acting and handling the material that would not have suited him in a studio picture. For instance, a few more takes could have improved the scene in which Bill fakes the recovery of his kid brother so that Cal can 'resuscitate' him. When the scene's shot, it's difficult to be reverent, but the scene would work, given that onlookers and relatives are clustered so closely around. Likewise, Cal's anger at the heritage is too visible, endangering the illusion. Sirk added his potentially incendiary comments about American life in blatant melodrama, and thanks to the studio system he had the full arsenal of top-flight designers, as well as the darlings of the star system, to fluff the feathers of his white-knuckled moral dissections. Durston has to make do with acting and good scripting, with *mise en scene* relegated to thoughtful thinking, but there's a definite link in Durston's work between genre games and a more active moral disposition. It makes you wonder just what he could have achieved as a filmmaker within the studio system if the design *mise en scene* is lacking, the actors do their best to keep our attention on the foreground. Philip Michael Thomas has star quality written all over him. Julian Cary-Poon, Josie Johnson and Peter Clune, inherited from Durston's *Blue Suede*, strike a decent balance between cliché and passion. Look out too for Ronda Fultz, who follows her pregnant Satanist in *I Drink Blood* with a sad, mournful turn as a warehouse child, in whose response to Calvin's health inspection is to tell him "I don't want to be venerable".

In one of the film's earliest scenes we encounter a city prostitute whose bad attitude is crudely and obviously signalled. But while we might expect the rest of the film to follow suit, Durston pointedly declines to blame prostitutes or the epidemic on St. Ford Island. This in itself is radical enough, but when eventually we learn who is responsible, the film's moral centre of gravity shifts definitively against the *status quo*. For sure, the film's critique of careless promiscuity is out of step with the free-love rhythm of the day. But Durston targets the corner of authority rather than make the all-too-easy link between disease and liberal tolerance. In *Sigma*, it's the uptight moral guardians, those who cannot face the truth and allow disease to fester unattended, who cause the plague, the youngsters merely suffer its effects. Perhaps the film's saddest scene is the one where Calvin interrupts a sand-dune orgy to deliver an STD lecture, and receives respectful attention instead of being told to butt out. But if nothing else it conveys a message: everyone has a role to play in the epidemic, and we're all in it together. It's a message that needs to be heard by the younger generation for the older generation for the older generation for the older generation and so on.

Terrorized by Mary Pickford. .

"Okay, for real. I was born on 10 September, 1921 in New Castle, Pennsylvania. Now you know how old that makes me - the same day, same year as Mickey Rooney and only stayed there for about a month before the police ran me out of town. Well, it might have been my father, William F. Duersten, who was always leaving town. He was German. An engineer, a very good one, but he had style and a great appreciation of the arts, many pals and gals in show business. Bela Lugosi was a good friend of his when Bela was a matinee idol in the theatre in Budapest and Berlin, the early years before Bela came to New York and Hollywood. My father was very handsome and my mother Dea was very beautiful. She was a small town girl from Macon, Missouri, who became a concert pianist for a short period; until she had children and then she was the greatest, most supportive Mom anybody could hope for. She was a direct descendent of Pres. Andrew Jackson and Daniel Boone (Lizabetha was Molly Jackson, who married Finis Boone). As a child, I was in love with both my mother and father. I was a child of a dark troubled beginning. I was a kid whose first ten years were during the Roaring Twenties. I could sing all the razzmatazz songs. My father, Daddy Bill, was so liberal, back in those days, (he was born in Berlin), but my Godfather was Jewish, Dad's very good friend Sigmund Romberg, the famous composer. I called him 'Rommy'. After that I was raised in Los Angeles, Chicago, Macon, Missouri, New Jersey, Milwaukee and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida - with a few trips to New York.

Durston's father took him to the big Broadway shows. Through his father's showbiz friends, he met many famous people, some of whom - Bela Lugosi, Ethel Waters, Patsy Ruth Miller, Rommy Romberg - remained friends long afterwards. "I can't remember a time in my early years when I didn't want to be in show business," he says. "I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just knew I wanted to be a part of it."

Durston Sr. or also introduced his son to the cinema. It was to be an unexpectedly traumatic experience. "When I was five, I was taken to see my first movie, Mary Pickford film my folks thought was safe enough in those days before the Hayes censorship and takes. It was *Sparrows*, which turned out to be Pickford's only horror film. She takes ten orphans (the Sparrows) through swamps and quicksand, a ligators snapping at their butts as they try to cross a stream via an overhanging branch from a tree that was ready to snap off. That's what sent this lot over the edge! They carried me out of the theatre screaming and crying. I was so impressionable. I wasn't allowed to see another movie for several years. When I was eight, I was allowed to see a stage production of *Dracula*, which was touring, and afterwards Dad took me backstage to meet Bela Lugosi. I was very impressed. I thought Bela was charming, aristocratic, gentle, a very dapper man, kind of like my father. They spoke several languages, were sharp dressers, and were connoisseurs of imported wines and beautiful women. Bela always mentioned that we had one thing in common. He came to America in 1921 - the year I was born. At thirteen, I was already into Ernest Hemingway and Tiffani Thayer, so my folks figured seeing *Frankenstein* wasn't going to flip me emotionally. But it did! More so than when I saw the film *Dracula* a year earlier. I had already seen *Dracula* on stage, met Bela and even been invited to his house. So I looked upon Bela as an actor, someone I had met personally, who was playing a part. But *Frankenstein* was such a departure, very sacrilegious at the time. As a result of seeing *Frankenstein*, I accidentally set fire to our house on Christmas Eve, and almost burned it down! I wrote to Boris Karloff about this, and he was very kind and considerate to answer my letter and give me some good advice about what is make-believe and what isn't. In later years I got to meet Boris, even wrote a script for him."

Durston's first participation in show business came with an acting role in high school. The play was called *The Patient*. "Wow! I thought that was pretty heavy stuff. I played a convicted murderer on the eve he was to be executed and I had such lines as, 'Towards the many times before their death, the valiant never taste of death but once.' I also did a production of *It's a Wise Child* (Laurence E. Johnson, 1924) when I was at Missouri University, majoring in journalism. By now I really wanted to be the next Ernest Hemingway, but I didn't mind having fun acting in one of the University dramatic productions. I was a nice looking kid when I was eighteen to twenty. In those days they had talent scouts out there touring the country for Hollywood talent. I didn't have a lead role. I played a spoiled rich kid - and believe it or not, with all the good talent in that production praying to be discovered as actors, I was offered a trip to Hollywood (nothing special because I had lived out there) but also a screen test at 20th Century Fox. If I did well, I would be offered a stock contract at a hundred dollars a week. To a kid in college that was a lot of money in those



days. I took it and never graduated from college. I didn't get a contract at the studio, but I was back there a few years later doing a film directed by George Cukor. I did meet some movie stars, directors and writers, and fell in love with the art of film production, and also the freedom you didn't have in the theatre."

Roles in plays such as *Night Must Fall*, *Young Man's Fancy* and *You Can't Take It With You* followed, but there was to be an inevitable deviation from his chosen path, when Durston was assigned to the 3rd Army Air Force Unit out of Washington for much of World War Two. After the War, he began working in show business again, this time in the new arena of nationwide television. Commercial TV broadcasts in America had begun in 1941 but it was only after the war ended that production was stepped up. Durston went to live and work in Chicago to be near his mother, who was sick, and whilst there notched up credits writing for shows like *Foxhead 400* and *Top of the Heather*, as well as devising a successful music variety programme called *A Hit Is Made*. He also created and produced *The Footworth Hour* on CBS Radio, which ran for two years from 1954-55. It was a musical program, with four big guest stars on each week, including talents such as Bob Hope, Rosemary Clooney and Duke Ellington. His success with ABC and CBS did not go unnoticed; when Durston returned to New York after the death of his mother in 1950, he was picked up by New York's NBC for their own hit music show. "I was the Associate Producer of *Your Hit Parade*. It walked off with seven Emmy Awards over eight years on TV. Every musical program on TV imitated it. It was produced live on NBC and was always sponsored by the American Tobacco Company, who owned the show. I created all the ideas used on the show and then, sort of as a line producer, I would follow through during the week, co-ordinating those ideas with the dancers, singers, stars, camera department, set designer, costumers, choreographer, prop men. We staged nine production numbers for each show and were on prime time Saturdays every week. I made good money!"

Intent on pursuing his passion for writing, Durston contributed scripts to some of the flagship TV drama shows of the era, including *Kraft Television Theatre*, one of the first popular drama series, launched by NBC in 1947). It was in the 1950s, as he enjoyed a sustained period of success in what is frequently referred to as American TV's 'Golden Age', that Durston had his first brush with the horror/sci-fi genre, writing for the hugely popular ABC series *Tales of Tomorrow*. One of the first sci-fi drama series to air in America, it was produced by Mort Abrahams, who went on to handle *The Man from U.A.C.U.E.* Durston recalls, "I did things like *The Glacier Giant*, about the Abominable Snowman, and *Mr. Fish*, which was re-titled *The Discovered Heart*, but was a forerunner of the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. A lot of plot ideas I stole from the newspapers, magazines and novels, but they were cleverly camouflaged. If I do say so

When *Your Hit Parade* went off the air in 1959, the American Tobacco Company and the State Department sent Durston on a goodwill world tour with a two-hour stage production of the show. "There were 386 costumes, ten changes of scenery, a seven-piece orchestra, and two Army escort planes," he explains. "I directed and produced it. We had some hair-raising experiences, there were some nightmares and one death."

Felicia and The Love Statue

Before moving on to Durston's feature directing career, it's worth clearing up a misunderstanding regarding his alleged first film: some sources credit Durston as co-director on the Turkish film *Siwar Yuz* (1964) with Metin Erksan. So is this a true credit? "No! But I think I know how there might be a mix-up. I worked on a movie made in Turkey called *Dry Summer*. It started and was produced by Ulvi Dogan, won the Golden Bear Award, 1st Prize at the Berlin Film Festival; the Golden Azteca, 1st prize at Acapulco; and the Cartagena, the Jury Prize at Colombia. *Dry Summer* wasn't a terrible movie. It was nicely made and acted, but it could not get released in the US. It was too bland for American audiences, Ulvi approached me about doing the translation and sub-titles. I had some ideas about making the film more commercial – some sequences where Ulvi suffers the horrors of a Turkish prison, some nude scenes in the shower, a sodomising scene and another short sequence when he gets out of prison and returns to his true love who has been suffering the cruelty of her old father or her landlord – I forget – and they manage to find time alone and make love. The nude and sex scenes were provocative, but not pornographic. Ulvi loved it and he put up the money to shoot those scenes in the States, circa 1971 – he couldn't get away with it in Turkey – and I edited them into the film. It made the film longer and gave it some texture. We changed the title to *Reflections* but it still didn't go anywhere. I didn't want any credit, but Ulvi insisted and I got a co-director, co-editor credit for the English translation and additional footage in the US version. End of story. I don't even have a video or film print of it."

In 1964, Durston made his true directorial feature debut, with *Felicia*, a big-budget romantic mystery about a woman under suspicion of murdering her wealthy and important husband. The film was shot over fourteen weeks in Puerto Rico with DP Saul Mordwell, a distinguished camera operator whose estimable Hollywood credits include Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men*, Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd*, Robert Rossen's *The Hustler* and Otto Preminger's *The Cardinal*. The soundtrack featured music by Nat King Cole, and Durston managed to coax forties beauty Louise Albritton (memorable as the willing bride of Lon Chaney Jr.'s vampire in Robert Siodmak's *Son of Dracula*) out of retirement for the role. *Felicia* was a hit in Spanish-speaking countries, but is fiendishly hard to find today, chiefly because any further exhibition was thwarted when the backer withdrew the film thanks to complications in his divorce proceedings.

Durston followed *Felicia* with *The Love Statue* (1966) another movie that's extremely difficult to see, though Durston has access to a film print and is considering releasing it. Made for a little under \$300,000, at a time when many young people were beginning to experiment with drugs and a freer sexual life, the film addressed the emerging counter-cultural agenda, telling the story of a group of Greenwich Village denizens and their experiences with LSD.

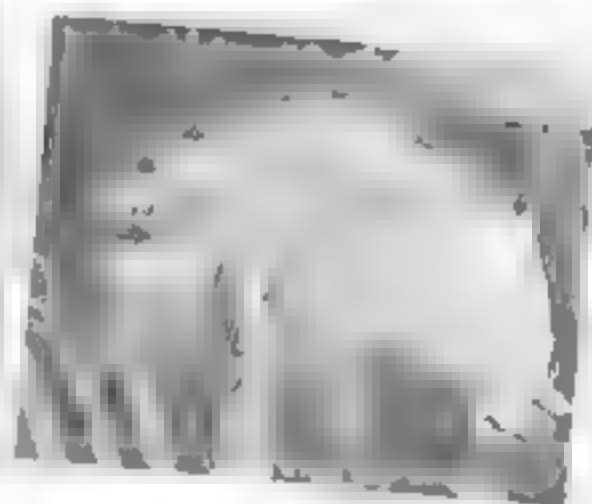
Tyler (Peter Ratray), a young Greenwich village artist, is having sexual and relationship problems with L. (Ordine Lise), his strong-willed, dominating girlfriend. Finally sick of her criticisms and mind-games, he throws her out of his apartment. Later, at a nightclub, a beautiful Japanese girl called Mashiko (Chisako Tsukuba) offers him LSD. Tyler accepts and spends his first acid trip at a debauched, uninhibited party where lesbianism and



Durston's erotic fantasy drama *The Love Statue* (1966) caught the mid-sixties mood of sexual and chemical experimentation.

THE LOVE STATUE





voyeurism are openly indulged. Still under the effects of the drug he returns to his apartment, where his sculptor friend Stan (Harvey J. Goldenberg, is also now staying. Tripping like crazy, Tyler becomes erotically fixated on a nude female sculpture Stan has been working on, and hallucinates a wild sex encounter with the statue coming to life. A few days later, Lisa returns and when Stan refuses to help her find Tyler she smashes the statue. Stan, driven to madness by her actions, murders her. Tyler comes home to find the corpse of his ex-girlfriend, and runs away from the horrible sight. Then, while roaming the streets, he encounters the woman who modelled for Stan's sculpture. The two of them strike up a relationship and go looking for Stan, who has gone completely off the deep end.

Commendably, Durston felt obliged to gain personal experience before the shoot began: "As long as I was writing

about LSD and directing a film about it, I had to experience it, which I did under a doctor's supervision," he reveals. "I found out I was not suicidal or homicidal, but I did have two personalities—a conservative side and an extrovert side which would be my mother and my father, and is why sometimes sympathise with my antagonists. I know I didn't sleep for two days; my mind was clicking so fast. And I couldn't type fast enough to put down all my thoughts. I wondered about being a gum machine in the subway, but nobody would buy my peppermint, only my luffa-fruff. What really impressed me about the drug, dangerous as it can be for troubled people, is that, unlike alcohol, if you drink too much, you sometimes can't remember anything. After you come out of LSD, you remember most everything. Amazing, even the crazy things. Once the doctor was convinced I wasn't a person who would hurt myself or anybody else, he released me to go home."

Whilst filming *The Love Statue* (The original title, *The Love Drug*, was changed because it couldn't be used in advertising), Durston met Jerry Gross, a director-producer-turned distributor who was to have a major impact on his future career. "This was before he formed Cinematic Industries and started producing some of his own movies," Durston explains. "He had a partner then and they dabbled in picking up other projects that were sitting on the shelf. They would fix 'em up a bit and get distribution. Their big talent was in producing the trailers. They were good at that. Jerry had given the boys who produced *The Love Statue* a small investment in the film. These young guys, Harvard grads, had the story idea for the film. They paid me to write the script based on their idea and to direct the film. One day during shooting in New York's Village and Little Italy (one of our locations was the now world-famous club The Bitter End, which was just becoming popular in the Village), Jerry dropped in to check on his investment, and see how things were going. That's how I first met Jerry Gross. He had great energy and enthusiasm, a born hustler, and I liked that, because I wasn't. My downfall has always been that I have never been able to hustle. And that's not because I was lazy."

I just couldn't pitch myself or my talent or manuscripts. Jerry and I got along well on that first meeting and it was the start of several years' association. Jerry had an ex-girlfriend, Betty Shea, and it upset her and made her angry that he kept staring at her. That was Jerry! The film opened at the World Playhouse, just off Broadway—a movie house that showed mostly foreign films, and for two or three days it did absolutely no business. It died and the exhibitor of the house was ready to pull it—but then, just in time, *Life* magazine broke the explosive Harvard Drug Scandal.¹ *The Love Statue* started doing great business, briefly—and tripled its investment in New York alone. Everybody wanted to know more about LSD. But it was a shabby film."

Durston did not enjoy a rapport with Sandy Barnett, the producer of *The Love Statue* ("Sandy and I didn't like each other. He was a society playboy who was heir to a chocolate candy fortune, a dilettante asshole who looked in the mirror and wondered what the other seven wonders of the world were doing.") but he speaks fondly of one particular cast member, with whom he enjoyed a warm relationship beyond the film: "Coleman Younger, III, the great grandson of the original American outlaw, played a small part in *The Love Statue*. He was a good-looking kid who looked a lot like James Dean, but I used him because he was good on a motorcycle. He got in a fight with another actor in the film who was hugging him, and a day or two later this guy tried

to kill Coleman, and was arrested. Can't remember his name. He didn't even have a credit in the film. Coleman was a rebel, like his great grandfather, only he rode a motorcycle instead of a horse. We liked each other immediately, had the same sense of humour. He used to take me for some wild spins on his motorcycle, and Coleman was the first one to introduce me to pot. Wow! It was an experience the first few times, but I realized I could float just as well on dry martinis, and not cough as much."

Being a filmmaker in the 1960s, and acquainted socially with the younger generation as well as his own, Durston saw for himself the beginnings of the new cultural odyssey upon which American youth was embarked. However, by the time *The Love Statue* was enjoying its brief burst of box-office success, he was already in his mid-forties. I asked him what he'd thought of the counter-culture as it emerged. "Well, it was there. I didn't approve or disapprove of it. You must consider that I was a very liberal person. I had many black friends and gay friends. I could never stand to see any other human being intimidated or abused. I see I can't. Of course I'm sure I inherited this trait from my father. But whenever I was in a situation where I thought I had the upper hand, I would defend these people. And the hippies, the flower-power groups, they were drawn to me like I was a magnet. I liked them and I helped them if I could. Mind you I didn't dress like the hippies, nor did I ride a motorcycle. I felt sorry for the hippies who were hooked on drugs, and tried to help, but there was so little real help I could offer. But I did go to many of their parties and activities. I of course loved *Easy Rider* - the freedom of its context and production. I knew that there was going to be an important place for independent films in the future. They didn't always have to be Hollywood studio controlled. My wife, Joan - a gal from New Orleans who was a socialite - hated it! We lived at the Sutton House on the East River, New York, and I was doing very well in TV then. But there's your difference. Socially prominent people and hippies did not approve of each other. I probably would have been a good hippie, but my life took a different turn. I didn't go to the big Woodstock event in New Jersey. Coleman invited me to go, and I would have, but Joan and I were in a crisis with our marriage, and her folks came up to New York to try to straighten us out that weekend. See what I mean?" I may have had an easier, maybe more productive life, but I didn't have the freedom of the hippies. I was married and I had a TV contract I had to live up to."

a bizarre love affair between a sculptor and his sculpture
— SIR MAGAZINE

The Love Statue: a bizarre love affair between a sculptor and his sculpture

— SIR MAGAZINE



THE LOVE STATUE



Ciao! à là Durston *Blue Sextet*

It was four years before Durston was able to mount another production, the erotic thriller *Blue Sextet* (1970). It tells the story of a group of six people whose memories of a recently deceased friend are explored in extended flashbacks. The director is not keen to recommend it today. "It has some moments, but not very many. What I am proud of is that at the time I was the only one who would dare to write or direct a film that had two alternate endings - what could have happened and what did happen. J.B. Priestley was the only other writer who dared use two endings, in his play *Dangerous Corner*. They made a movie of the play (which he didn't adapt for the screen) and the asshole studio that produced it [RKO in 1934] only used the happy ending - the cowards! *Blue Sextet* was not a hit. I had trouble with that movie. They ran out of money, but I worked two weeks without pay just to finish what I started. And the French actress Adrienne Jaber was a temperamental bitch. It just didn't have the teamwork."

Sometimes, a filmmaker's unhappy experiences making a picture can blind him to its charms. Durston eventually let me see a tape of *Blue Sextet*, and, despite his misgivings, I found it to be a wonderfully sly and perverse thriller, very much in the Italian mode of films like *The Sweet Body of Deborah*, or more accurately, Mario Bava's *Four Times That Night*. The plot revolves around the recently deceased Jeff Ambler (John Damon's friend, lover, businessman, art gallery owner, pornographic filmmaker, drug-dealer, ravisher and all-round amoral psychopath. His mysterious death at the start of the film triggers a cat's cradle of seamy revelations, as his friends congregate after



The figures in this one-sheet for *Blue Sextet* (Durston's most decadent film, seems to echo the style of European comic-strip art, such as Guido Crepax's *Valentina* - although it has to be said the typography lacks a bit)

bottom of
Promotional art for *The Love Statue*

P. 101 - The Love Statue

Durston's...
this publicity shot from *The Love Statue*
Durston says

"This is my friend Coleman who worked in *The Love Statue* with a scar from me cut on his lip. He loved doing it."

"How often do I get...
somebody try to kill me with a...
acting wasn't for him. He was...
grandson of the famed American outlaw...
Coleman Younger, but he rode a Harley...
instead of a horse. He started a delivery...
service in Manhattan. I got him some good...
accounts like Mobil and DeWitt Labs and...
had daily deliveries. Soon he had seven...
Harleys and six guys working for him. He...
was doing great with Fleet Messengers...
which is still delivering today. Then one day...
Coleman said he was in trouble. He...
me something like '20 parking citations. He...
had never bothered to pay. They were confiscating his blues and he had to sell out fast...
before they slammed him in jail. Coleman got...
towed on his Harley the next day and I have...
never heard from him since. He was 30. He's a...
guy! I wonder what has happened to him. If...
he's still alive or dead. We had some good...
times together. Just don't know."



the inquest for a long night of drinking and soul-baring. By morning they have at last understood the truth behind apparent suicide, and the extent to which Jeff screwed, exploited and bamboozled them all. *Blue Sextet* is a glimpse Jeff through the perceptions of his friends, but apart from that he's like Patricia Highsmith's "Talented Mr. Ripley": an arbane seducer luring others to their doom without a care in the world, gazing idly into a mirror and ponders, "I never know whether it's me I'm looking at, someone who looks like me. I'm always waiting to be introduced."

The fun comes from seeing how each of the six we see in one way or another, shifted by this callous Lothario, and in true *glacé* fashion, they all have a motive for murder. George (Peter Clune), Jeff's business partner, learns that Jeff is actually the father of his child; Ed Snelair (Mark La Roche) reveals that Jeff tricked him into sex with a wealthy transvestite (who proclaimed "I'm the darkness") before switching off the lights and hurting him; Felicia (Adrienne Gilbert) claims that Jeff drugged her and then let strangers ravish her as punishment for rebuffing his sexual advances; and Tish (Coco Sumar) explains how Jeff beat her during sex and then abandoned her, seduced her new boyfriend Bud (Harlan Phillips) into joining him in bisexual orgies. Bud appears to be the only one who still loves Jeff, but eventually even he can take no more.

The plot is a convoluted affair that requires close attention, but fans of the madly complicated Italian noir will recognise this movie as a Stateside cousin. Duvall plays his hand beautifully with plenty of twists and surprises, and just like the European thrillers mentioned even the art design gets a look-in: for instance, on the walls of Jeff's apartment, a painting of a prismatic horned demon sardonically counters another prominent



BLUE SEXTET



displayed portrait, portraying Jeff in the tasteful style of blue-period Picasso. (Considering the film's modernist multi-faceted characterisation of Jeff, perhaps a cubist portrait would have been an overstatement?) The film explores the amorality of its central character, but it also skewers the machinations and hypocrisies of the Blue Sextet themselves. Tish for instance is revealed as an insatiable manipulator who feigned suicide to write her way into a rich man's affections. However, she gets more than she bargained for when it turns out that her target has a taste for rough sex – she can't cope with this and feels degraded, even having the nerve to complain that Jeff doesn't respect her as a person. As was perhaps probable given the time the film was made, Bud's desire for Jeff is slightly displaced, with his bemused attendance at a gregarious gay party standing in for the love affair we suspect has taken place. The film is far from coy, though not Bud's forlorn obsession, he forms a masochistic attachment to Jeff that can even be dislodged by the latter's revelations: "I had happier times with him, even when he was laughing at me, than I had with anyone." Jeff he sobs. Such tormented plaints may belong to the era that gave us such "weep if you're sad to be gay" productions as *The Boys in the Band*, but Horan Cary Fox (a capable performer (as also seen in *Sigma*) and a director who has kind one of the least common and biases in Hollywood loyalty. It may be misplaced, but among the back-biting and double-crossing of the Blue Sextet, it's a welcome glimpse of saintliness.

Plotting aside, there are numerous treats along the way. The aforementioned bisexual party is pretty daring for its time, with semi-nude men kissing and fondling each other in a floor show with two butch numbers wrestling. A *Tomb Raider* torture dungeon sequence (one of Jeff's fantasies) looks like out-takes from the fabulous Mickey Rourke vehicle *Blade of Horror*, climaxing in a spot-grungy organ-ripping that brought back fond memories of *Repe Cardona's Night of the Bloody Apes*. And Jeff's gut-twisted rape-ravishment of Felicia comes on like *The Godfather* meets *Plastic Inevitable* meets *Roger Cornman*. "It was intimate. I felt like I was drowning in a whirlpool of it and freak images," Felicia recalls. But my insight into Jeff's depraved world comes with a glimpse of his topless sculpting class ("A kind of emotional release, in which the artistic endeavour does not flow, the soul lies free and naked," he declares, tongue-in-cheek), in which it's the students not the models who end up around stripped to their undies.

For all the fun and frolics of *Blue Sextet*, Durston approaches the ending in a minor key, pastiching *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as the confessions and revelations don't leave everyone emotionally exhausted. "If I say things it look better in the morning, I'll say Liz. Then, as if sending up the fears of those who'd rather die than watch a film with a downbeat ending, Durston skips back in time to the early stages of the movie in which the six friends debated whether or not to let sleeping dogs stay in their closets. This time round, they agree to leave Jeff's secrets alone, and the film ends in jolly banter of the no-longer-blue sextet, until the tune swoops over them with its Greek chorus lyric, "You heard the story of the Blue Sextet? They searched for the truth, and they found regret".

Blue Sextet is a confection, an entertainment, but in its waywardly there's a great deal of style, interleaved with the



cheerful sleaze and barbed wit, there's a character train of thought to do with loneliness and the mysteries of identity. The idea that no one ever really knows anyone else is taken a step further by the suggestion (now *de rigueur* in post-modernist discourse) that perhaps we're no more than the sum total of the impressions we make on others. After all, we can be totally re-defined by a single perception, as those accused of rape, for instance, know very well. Jeff is the hollow centre of the film, dead and gone, defined only by the memories and self-justifications of others, but Durston gives him one last laugh in the form of a shot from one of his dirt-tittle name reels, in which for a second he looks at the camera and winks. In that jolly rogue-ish look, there's nothing of the maniacal egotist and psychopath we've just seen, the film once again stressing the impossibility of ever really knowing someone. It's this impossibility that propels the *Blue Sextet* back into the past. Ignorance is bliss? Maybe not – the film expends far too much energy revealing the sordid truth for that to be Durston's conviction – but knowledge is certainly no guarantee of happiness.

above: EXCHANGE "THEY SEARCHED FOR THE TRUTH, AND THEY FOUND REGRET"

A montage of scenes from *Blue Sextet* (Margaret Callahan)

the artist

Jeff the centre of the film

to be remembered

Tish (Coco Sumak)

Jeff on his way to the rock

"Satan was an acid-head!"

"*I Drink Your Blood* is the pinnacle of the blood horror movie. It's fast, unrelentingly violent, and sexually explicit, jolting out a new shock every few minutes."

*Bill Linds, **Sleazoid Express** (book)*

Hot on the heels of *Blue Velvet* came *I Drink Your Blood*, and now Durston was firing on all cylinders. As brash and energetic as a vintage Alice Cooper record, and easily as ghastly, it ensured once and for all that horror fans would revere his name. Shot in 1970 and first released under its more notorious title in February 1971, *I Drink Your Blood* went before the cameras as *State Farm*, a fake title Durston used to protect his intended release title of *Phobia*, which he feared might be ripped off before he could finish the movie.²

By 1970, Durston was no longer under contract to a TV company, and his marriage to Joan was over. It was time for a change: "I moved out of Sutton House from the East side to the West side, a bit of a social drop, but still very nice, on Central Park West, right off the park. Jerry called, said he admired my work, and invited me to his spacious production office for a chat. He was now CEO of Cinematation Industries, and was making a name for himself and his company. He asked me if I had seen *Night of the Living Dead*, and if I had, what did I think of it and did I think I could top it for graphic horror and original plotting? Jerry never minced words. What he had to say he came right out with. He said he wanted to make the most graphic horror film ever produced, but he didn't want any vampires, man-made monsters, werewolves, mad doctors or little people from outer space. I remember those words so clearly, which is why I blew my top when he changed the title to *I Drink Your Blood*! If I came up with a good idea, he would not give me a percentage of the picture, but he would double what my last writing and directing contract was with the Guilds. It was a challenge, but I said I would like to try."

Gross had seen Durston's work on ABC's *Tales of Tomorrow*. "Jerry said what he liked about it was that no matter how outlandish the story, it had roots in probability, everyday situations – which is what Mort Abrahamson always demanded in the *Tales* scripts and what made it such a TV hit. For three weeks I wrestled with ideas – nothing unusual popped into my head. Then I saw this small piece in the newspaper about a mountain village in Iran (population eighty) – a pack of rabid wolves attacked the local schoolhouse, occupied by two school teachers and eighteen or nineteen children. One only has to read up on rabies and hydrophobia to know that it is highly contagious and attacks the central nervous system, driving victims mad and homicidal. I called a doctor, an authority on rabies, who had been flown over there to save the lives of as many as he could. He was from Nova Scotia, but he was in New York at the time and we got together. He showed me some 8mm film he took of little children locked in cages like animals and frothing at the mouth, gripping the bars of the cage like raving maniacs. I made the hair on the back of my head elevate. I had nothing so horrible, yet so real, in my life. That would be my story for Jerry, and I would take a page from Hitchcock and call it *Phobia* – like his *Psycho*! I started the story out, he almost immediately without telling Jerry anything about the idea. The idea I

had was for a small town to come down with an epidemic of rabies. It hadn't been done. I knew Jerry would buy it. And, of course, he did. I think he said, 'Oh, shit! That's it. Go home. Go to work. You're on salary as of now!' And I did. During the time I was writing the script (it took about eight weeks, then I went back for revisions and adding stuff – another five weeks) there was so much newspaper and TV coverage on the capture and conviction of Charles Manson, his mean face on the cover of *Time* and *Life*. One couldn't avoid him, and as horrible as it was, everybody was fascinated or obsessed with him. Suddenly I thought, what greater horror than the invasion of a Satan-worshipping group along with the rabies epidemic? And it tied together so easily. I rewrote, creating the character Horace Bones, inspired by Manson. It didn't change the mood of the story, it added to it. I changed very little. But he fit. It wasn't as if the Manson idea had just been stuck in there for more horror – Horace Bones created a real threat to the town and added some scenes that actually shocked the audience."

When Durston gave Jerry Gross his script, the veteran exploitation producer was over the moon. "Jerry flipped," he recalls. With Gross's enthusiasm ringing in his ears, Durston began work on pre-production. First, he hired a location finder, who earned his crust and then some by discovering a derelict borg called Sharon Springs in Ulster State New York, near the Canadian border. It was perfect, giving the production a distinctive and memorable setting. It had once been a popular spa with warm mineral springs, but when the springs dried up the town did too. "It was a strange, lonely place," recalls Durston, "only about a hundred population hanging on. If you included the surrounding farms, but there was a sheriff and deputy – no restaurant, no movie theatre, but a general store. You had to drive twenty-five miles to reach civilization as we New Yorkers knew it. We kind of had the pick of the town locations, including an old hotel, The Roosevelt, that was going to be torn down within two months. We gave the town \$300 and practically tore the hotel apart ourselves. And although we were very lucky, thinking we would be saving a lot of money, we were actually very foolish – or I was. All those glass windows we broke or smashed were not faked, but real glass. Some of the actors could have gotten seriously cut up. I think about that a lot and realize I must have been blessed, but nuts."

Gross proved to be a supportive, even indulgent producer. "There was no problem with getting paid, or the bills being paid, or getting what I needed," Durston recalls. "It was Jerry's company money and I had nothing to do with the financing except to make up a tentative budget, and submit it – and Jerry approved it. He gave me total control over casting, hoping I wouldn't mind a few suggestions. And I must say he left me completely alone when I was directing the film. He came to the location only once. He saw the dailies each day in New York, called me and said, 'It's looking better and better – better than anybody on the board expected it to be.' I think we only went over about \$100,000. Jerry never complained. He knew he had something."

The film was shot entirely on location, in just eight weeks. "I spoke to God, and we had no weather problems," Durston jokes. "The locals were fascinated. A Hollywood film company coming to their sleepy little community to make a film – we didn't tell them it was a horror film. But they didn't know how to take us,

especially the crew. Now the crew was a hundred percent professional – these were guys who knew what to do and how to do it quickly. If I asked for something on the spur of the moment, like ‘source of light’ or something, rickety like that, they were right there with it. They were tough and worked hard, but they were also wild – some on drugs. I didn’t know about that at the time. Stupid me! I got very friendly with the sheriff, as I knew we were going to need some help. He wasn’t a redneck, but a very nice guy with a sense of humour. He was also quite moral minded. He appears in the movie as the sheriff who comes in with his men in the shoot-out climax. He would show up sometimes, unexpectedly, which made some of the locals nervous about the shooting and smoking.

One night the sheriff asked me if some of the locals could come out and watch us shooting. He said he would see that they didn’t get in the way. They came out, the sheriff had bleacher seats for them, across the street from the Roosevelt Hotel. We were going to shoot a scene involving Iris Brooks, playing the role of the promiscuous girl, Frieda, who eventually infects the construction workers. That evening Iris was to run out of the hotel screaming and crying, a reaction to seeing Ro chop off Shelley’s leg. Now Iris was a good actress, but she always had to be motivated. She told me before we started shooting the scene that it was very difficult for her to cry on cue. What she suggested was that just before we started rolling the camera I talk very rough to her, call her some bad names, and smack her across the face so that she would cry. Well, this wasn’t my method of getting somebody to cry (I liked to talk them into it), but I thought, anything to get the shot. At that point I hadn’t counted on an audience. We were pretty keyed up that night. I yelled ‘Stand by!’ Iris ran out of the hotel down to the camera position. I spoke very mean to her and smacked her across the face. Iris ran back into the hotel. I called for the camera to roll and Iris came out screaming and crying. It worked – for Iris and the scene. We did four takes on that scene, and each time it got better – but the audience of locals were irritated. They told the sheriff that I was unbearable to the actors – they thought I was a sadist and would be arrested or replaced by another director. They were real v incensed.

As various novel situations were played out before the camera, the locals started to fret over just what sort of work they were allowing to be made in their town. Rumour got around that we were a bunch of degenerates living with rats,” Durston laughs. “Those rats came from New York. I’ll have you know! They had been raised in New York, were very well trained, and were expensive by comparison with two handlers. We ordered twenty five, and I never had to fence them off for a scene. They could be turned loose and would all come back when the whistler blew a high pitch whistle. Another funny story about the rats concerns the dead ones we had to buy from a medical centre forty miles away from our location. The dead rats were not to be harmed or abused in any way, so the prop man had to buy a box of dead white lab rats, spray-paint them the night before the shoot to match the dead rats. They had to be kept on ice overnight in a cool place. The cottage I occupied had a refrigerator so I suggested to the prop man that the rats be kept there. Well, I had a few cast members over for drinks that night, including the sheriff. I forgot about the dead rats



in the bottom of the fridge, and while I was busy talking to the sheriff, I told a couple of actors to help themselves to drinks, and there were ice cubes in the fridge. When he opened the fridge and saw all those dead rats packed in there, there was naturally an explosion of yelling, screaming and laughing over the discovery. What the sheriff thought I don’t recall, or don’t want to. I’m sure he thought we were in trouble. The townsfolk certainly did.

Durston has fond memories of working with his cast, many of whom he still knows today. A lot of the actors in the movie went on to bigger and better films, like Ariane Farber, who played the on-screen female lead in *The French Connection*. And I want you to know that two of our rats went on to playing the title roles in two hit horror movies *Hillbilly* and *Ben* – and they were the leads. Talk about being a star-maker!”

“Grace Bones here, a construction worker who says ‘I Drink Your Milk’.”



Rafal and Jadine Wong
in *I Drink Your Blood*

One of the film's most iconic and ex-audomani performers is most missed out on her role. One morning after the film was completely cast, a young lady walked into my office. There were no parts open for her to read, but she was so beautiful I just had to have her in the film. I was her first film – so you might say I discovered her. I wrote in the role of the mute girl and gave her one big scene. Her name was Lynn Lowry and she went on to do films for some of our great horror film directors like George Romero and David Cronenberg. Lynn lives here in L.A. She's a helluva good actress, and today appears on the theatre, and even performs in nightclubs as a singer. Durston's instincts were impeccable. Lynn Lowry is a stunning presence. She has a pagan, elfin appearance that makes Cate Blanchett's 'Caladriel' in *The Lord of the Rings* look like a Russian shot-putter. Lowry draws the attention in a scene even when she's utterly silent, and has a knack for conveying a strange inner dissidence that must surely have gained her the attention of the aforementioned Romero (who cast her in his 1979 film

The Cruelty) and Cronenberg, who put her in his 1975 feature debut, *Shivers* – of which, more later).

I Drink Your Blood is notable for many things, not least its casually multi-ethnic cast. The Satanic name was made up of Black, White, Chinese and Indian members, with no explanation deemed necessary, which perhaps recalls Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* but is more likely just a function of Durston's gregarious liberal sensibility. Another wonderful guy was George Patterson who was a ballet dancer with the New York City Ballet Company. He played the part of Rollo, the black dude, who goes on the rampage. Everybody loved George. He had a wonderful sense of humour, a magnificent and graceful body, with a dick the size of a coke bottle. When we did the nude scene, I ordered everybody who was not involved in the scene off the set – only me, the cameraman, soundman, and one lighting technician, which made it more comfortable for those who did have to disrobe. But the girls in the company found a barn that overlooked the location, and they all sneaked up there quietly to get a look at George in the buff – with four pairs of binoculars!

Of course, the most memorable character of all is ex-leader Horace Bones, played by Bhaskar (full name Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury), a strikingly handsome actor of Indian origin. His father was a famous sculptor whose works became national treasures in India," Durston recalls. "Bhaskar became the world's foremost interpreter of East Indian dancing, which is quite an art of rhythm and muscular control. He had made a few films in India; he was even a singing Tarzan in one movie. He made a guest appearance playing himself in *Blue Sextet*, doing his famous Fire Dance. And then came *I Drink Your Blood*. Bhaskar wanted to act and was excited about playing the part of Horace Bones.

Bhaskar is a marvelously vital and demonic presence in *I Drink Your Blood*, bringing to an essentially evil character a distinctly charming streak, which perhaps reflects his cultural background, where moral concepts are less absolute and Manichean. There's no doubt that Horace Bones is a monster, but the wicked sparkle in Bhaskar's eye goes a long way to explaining why we feel tempted, as viewers, to sympathise with the villains rather than the put-upon locals.

It's probably that same spark, visible in his onscreen persona, which gave him the strength to overcome a calamity that was soon to follow in real life. Not long after the film wrapped, Bhaskar's life took a painfully tragic turn, as Durston explains: "After he finished filming, he was scheduled on a nationwide concert tour. At one engagement in the Mid-West he was rehearsing stage, making a series of pivots and leaps, when the stagehand at the light board backstage accidentally pushed the wrong switch and threw the stage and auditorium in darkness. Bhaskar pivoted off the stage and fell into the pit. He has been paralyzed from the hips down ever since – cut short at the peak of his career." (For the full story, see the detailed interview with Bhaskar elsewhere in this chapter.)

Durston has nothing but praise too for his right-hand man on the shoot, DP Jacques Demarevaux. Jacques was a rugged Frenchman with the heart of a poet. The first time we began working together, we instantly liked each other. He was an excellent cameraman and director of photography, and I immediately fell in love with his work.

He gave me exactly what I wanted. He didn't come onto the film until we were one-third into production. Joe Mangine² began shooting the film with me, and the third week he left me, because somebody else made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Mangine and I had been working on *Blue Sextet* and one TV program that was part of the *My Log* series. We had been close, had the same ideas, and loved Hitchcock's theories about filmmaking – including 'the source of light' for atmosphere. We started lighting that way on *I Drink Your Blood*, and Jacques came along and picked it up, so the film has the same look throughout. Mangine and Jacques were both good DPs. So I was lucky. Mangine did not get credited for his work on *I Drink Your Blood*. However, years later we did get a nomination for an elaborate forty-five-minute industrial film I wrote and directed for an art gallery about the way in which paintings are promoted and sold.

Drink Your Blood is distinguished by an all-time sexist exploitation movie score, which positively encourages a humorous, even campy evaluation of the film. Durston recalls, "Clay Pits did the score after I finished with the film and editing. I returned to L.A. so I could around for the scoring, but I approved of what he did. In fact I liked it a lot. He gave the music a tongue-in-cheek kind of treatment, in some parts like an old-fashioned melodrama, which was the humour the film needed, after Cineration re-edited my film to remove some of the humour. This was before the MPAA rating system was created. Later I wanted Clay Pits to score something else I was doing, but I couldn't locate him, so through the music union, and I heard that he had changed his name, and a successful reputation, which would explain why he didn't want his name on a film titled *I Drink Your Blood*."

The film has many great qualities, but of course the most extreme for the time it was made. It was what grabbed the audience by the balls back in 1971, and still startles viewers today. Back then, *I Drink Your Blood* was the only very low-budget reach for Hersche.



Satan Was an Acid Head



Gordon Lewis's level of grisliness. When I say this Durston is thrilled: "Oh, wow. I'm compared to the *Wizard of Blood*!" Happy though he is to be appreciated in such a way, he then rightly makes a few distinctions.

Although *I Drink Your Blood* has become a cult classic, you must consider I was not a writer/director who specialised in horror at the time. Hersche Gordon Lewis was, and there are a few others who are very good at it. The in-your-face violence was not something I just threw into the picture. I was told to come up with a story that would out-do all other horror films. The violence was well thought out in advance, and I think it was well motivated, which would exonerate it from being an in-your-face horror picture. The fact that *I Drink Your Blood* is a landmark film – the first ever to be rated 'X' based on violence alone – indicates that I succeeded in giving Gross and the public what they wanted. I do not, however, think that *I Drink Your Blood* deserved the honour of the first 'X' marking it the most gruesome horror film ever made at that time. I think the reason audiences reacted to it so dramatically was because it was a violent story that could probably have happened. The violence was not far-fetched or unmotivated. Hydrophobia is a reality. Manson is and was a reality. The point I'm making is that the more audiences can identify with a situation that might happen to them or could happen to them, the bigger the scare. Yes, when *I Drink Your Blood* first opened, the audience did scream and yell and talk to the actors on the screen.

"You're gonna get it!" – that sort of comment. One theatre tried to sue Cineration Industries because, at a Saturday midnight showing, some of the audience tore up the seats. This may not have happened. It may have been a Jerry Gross press pique. Today, however, the young audiences who have rediscovered this film and brought it back to become a cult classic find more 'camp' elements in it. They still scream and yell, but they also laugh a lot too. And my gore can't begin to match the special digital effects gore in today's films.

ally
Sue Litt and Horace Bones gaze in horror at

Chaos in the wake
Molly protects

Jacques Demarecault, the DP who replaced Joseph Mangine on *I Drink Your Blood*

What a fine man and DP. He was but never said a word. I said

"How ya doing?" and he answered, "Let's go!" "Great! Working with you guys belongs here." That was while we were doing *Drink Your Blood*.

'I Ruin Your Title!' and 'I Eat Your Profits!'

Durston may have enjoyed the fun and frenzy of making the film, but what followed nearly soured the experience. The first unpleasant surprise was a change of title, from

Durston's preferred *Phobia* to Gross's choice, *I Drink Your Blood*. Durston is scathing about the replacement title: "Ridiculous... there are no vampires in the film, not even a Bloody Mary! They might as well have called it 'I Shit on Your Saddlebag'!" He's right, of course: the title bears no real connection to what happens onscreen, but as Wes Craven was to discover the following year with his ultra-violent debut *The Last House on the Left*, a title can mysteriously transform the fortunes of a film, even if it has nothing at all to do with the movie. *Last House* initially played as *Krug and Company* and briefly as *Sex Crime of the Century*, but it settled under these more apposite titles. Both Lee Lewis of Hammer Releasing, who came up with the *Last House* title, and Barney Cohen, the Cinemation ad man who invented the *I Drink Your Blood* moniker, applied a weird brand of business voodoo, connecting titles that seemed to leap off the marquees directly into the imaginations of cinemagoers. And speaking of voodoo...

The second surprise was that Gross had paired *I Drink Your Blood* on a double-bill with Del Tenney's black-and-white 1964 slasher *Forbidden Bloodbath*, now renamed *I Eat Your Skin* to match the new title of Durston's film. Although this double-bill and the attendant promotional campaign have gone down in exploitation history as one of the great horror hard-sells, Durston was understandably unimpressed.

He was never consulted. When I found out about the change of title and the plan to put it out on a double-bill, it was already for release. I saw one of the ads they used but it was too late to do anything about it. Quite obviously Cinemation Industries did not like losing money, even when they made a mistake. They had bought a dog of a film they could not sell or give away. *Phobia* was better than expected, which is why it didn't have a drive-in opening. I try not to badmouth other filmmakers' work, but *I Eat Your Skin* was really amateurish, so shoddy it's barely acted, badly directed, badly written, and all the critics seemed to agree. It was a Cinemation Industries mistake buying it, and my film had to suffer so that *I Eat Your Skin* wasn't a loss for the damn stockholders.

He continues, "*Phobia* was supposed to play drive-ins, and I thought it was probably a drive-in movie, especially after they changed the title. But the surprise was that it opened at the first class Warner's Theater on Broadway and there was already a line when the box office opened the first day. The film made money, even after the MPAA's ruling meant the film had to be cut-cut-cut to get an 'R' rating."

But what the MPAA did, bless their dear little two-faced hearts, without realizing it, was to make *I Drink Your Blood* a landmark film, a big controversy. So naturally everybody wanted to see it and decide for themselves if it deserved an 'X' rating, based solely on violence.

I apply the scenes that were cut by Cinemation before the MPAA made their contribution have been reinstated on the DVD release. One unnerving sequence involving Doc Banner (Richard Bowler), in which the unsuspecting old man is dosed with LSD, was cut short for all prior versions, as Durston explains: "Richard Bowler, who is gone now, I'm sorry to say, had appeared in a TV play I wrote and directed him in two summer stock productions (I worked for a while as a director at the Fairhaven Summer Theater in

Massachusetts). The scene was brutally cut short, and for the DVD it has been restored in full under the influence of LSD he hallucinates that his grandchildren's parents returned from the grave, accusing him of not bringing them up right, of not being a good parent, and he throws the ghosts out of the house. It's all back in, I'm happy to say, including the new ending taken from the outtakes where Pete, the boy, gives himself up to the sheriff, but they can't find a pair of handcuffs that don't slide off. They don't take his confession that he committed a horrible crime seriously.

"What did you do, kid? Break a window?" An never-before-seen sequence where my nephew Jack, who plays Roger, the criminal, gets his head blown off by his girlfriend, the bakery queen.

Durston's deal with Gross (no percentage of profits but double his established directing salary), though Spartan, was at least honoured in full. "I didn't have any problem with Jerry Gross and the original theatrical distribution. I didn't have anything to do with it. Cinemation Industries put up the money to make the film and they also had a major distribution arm in the US as well as the foreign market. I was paid off for the theatrical rights (video had not come over)." Born in New York City in 1940, Jerry Gross was an exploitation director (*Girl on a Chain Gang*, *Teenage Mother*, *Female Animal*) who put down the camera to concentrate on the business end of filmmaking. A non-unionist, he was the only person willing to take a risk on *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in 1971, stepping up as producer when African-American movies proved unprofitable by the majors. He distributed art house fare like *Juliet of the Spirits* and counter-culture efforts like *Fritz the Cat*, before starting his own company, The Jerry Gross Organisation, in the late seventies, and devoting his energies to marketing extreme horror films such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *The Bugle Man* (1980).

Recalling the contradictions of the man, Durston muses: "Gross could be gross, but there was a fine line. He also appreciated arty films, and took chances nobody else would, such as *Johnny Got His Gun*, Dalton Trumbo's masterful but oh-so-depressing piece. Jerry did have an intellectual side. Years later, after he lost Cinemation Industries (it went bankrupt), he moved to L.A., met a wonderful woman called Marion whom he married and they formed another company with a big office in Century City. Marion was very smart and shrewd, and Jerry adored her. She was just what he needed to get going again. And they did, and were successful for a short period of time. I think if Jerry had known this woman when he had Cinemation Industries, it



never would have gone bankrupt. She really knew how to organise a company. I liked her, and she said she liked me the best of all, Jerry's former associates. Jerry called me in and we forgot our differences on *I Drink Your Blood*. He wanted another horror story from me that his new company would produce. So he gave me some development money and I went to work for him again. What I came up with this time was a classic type horror film, not all blood and guts. It was called *The Well of Loneliness*. Jerry was sold on it because Marion was sold on it. But here we go again - before he got it produced, Marion died. Jerry just went to pieces. He was so in love with this woman and he never recovered from the loss of his first and only true love. I think Jerry was an original. He was a modern day PT Barnum. Most of his competitors, even if they didn't like him, at least respected his dauntlessness."

Sadly, Jerry Gross dropped out of the industry during the eighties, demoralised by his personal loss and by the squeeze tactics of the jealous major studios, who were crowding in on the independents. When he was found dead in Los Angeles, California, on 20 November 2002, at the age of sixty-two, he was without family and friends, except for Arlene Farber (Sylvia in *I Drink Your Blood*) who starred in *Tecumseh Mother* and finally ensured that Gross received a proper funeral.

"I don't want to be venereal!"

Durston followed *I Drink Your Blood* with *Sigma* (1972), a "satby" tale for a film about the horrors of venereal disease (imagine how Jerry Gross might have retitled this one!) In the event, Charles B. Moss Jr., the son of theatre-chain president Charles B. Moss Sr., put up the money and handled distribution. The film got quite a few rave notices, but failed to really pull them in at the box office. It received a minor video release but has never caught on as much as predecessor.

"I think even Charles got a bad distribution deal, and his father owned a string of theatres on the East coast!" says Durston. "So, being exhibitors, they just pulled the plug as long as they weren't going to get a fair share of the profit from the distributor. I don't know this to be a fact, I only suspect this was the case. It never was a box office winner. Charles Moss was too smart to let anybody clean up on his picture, and he lost money. So he pulled it. My theory!"

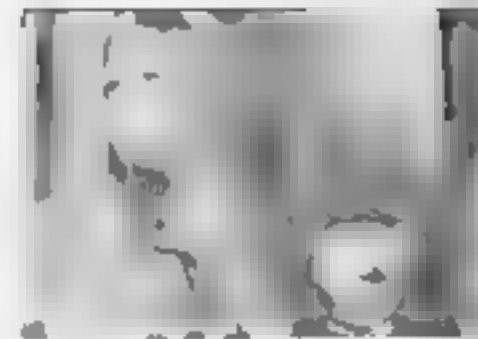
Sigma is a strong story, well acted, but rather out-of-step given the 'free love' vibes of the time. So what needed Durston to tackle such a potential audience turn-off? "I would never have tackled it on my own volition, but I needed a job - another picture. I'd been sitting on my ass for six months, managing the Ziegfeld Theater TV and the advertising agencies had turned their backs on me, because I've always been an out-spoken loudmouth. I was interviewed by *Variety* and complained about the sponsors producing the shows, who didn't know the first thing about professional showmanship. I said they should stick to selling their products, and allow the networks to produce the shows. So I wasn't very popular or in demand at that time. Charles Moss came along with this idea, something really grim and old hat: V.D. And he paid me to come up with a story. V.D. was hot stuff back in the thirties. *Damaged Goods*, *The Road to Ruin*, but now it was passé, passe and no longer a threat with the discovery of penicillin. What could I do with this? Where was the twist? So I went to the health authorities. A young doctor working for the

Medical Examiner gave me the clue. I asked him what was the biggest threat to getting syphilis: without hesitation he said: the attitudes of people - the stigma on the character of anybody who got it. Like anybody with a prison record, or an illegitimate child, and trying to keep it quiet. That was it. I was off and running with a story. As I started developing the idea of people who were stigmatised - like blacks, prostitutes, gays - I started taking interest in what I was doing. I saw it as a mystery, and then once the mystery was revealed, it would explode into drama. It almost became melodrama, but I think the country whorehouse, painted 'titty pink', softened it a bit. I was determined it wasn't going to be a *Damaged Goods*, about teens having sex, or a soft porno. I think that's what Charles was looking for. When I handed him a finished script, he didn't like it at all. And he said it wasn't what he wanted. But his father and mother read the script, didn't expect to like it because of the subject matter, and loved it. They thought it was intelligent and deftly handled for the times. I think they convinced Charles to go with it."

Durston believes that Moss Senior's intervention caused some friction. "I liked both the parents, and I think they liked me. He sat through *I Drink Your Blood*, screened at the Criterion on Broadway, one of his own theatres, and said it was well made - in other words, before Charles got the money to make the movie, Mr. Moss had to approve of me and my work. Okay, fine - he approved. But I think if I had been Charles's father, I would not have read the script of *Sigma*, or told Charles to go with it. I would have let Charles make that decision for himself and if he made a mistake, it was Charles Jr.'s mistake. Charles had a lot to deal with to prove himself and be his own person."

Durston pauses, before explaining the course of his sometimes stormy relationship with Moss. "I grew to like Charles. But he was complex, and didn't make it easy getting to know him. He had a very successful father, who was a charmer and well liked by everybody. So it was something he had to live up to, to be as successful as his father. In the beginning Charles and I did not like each other for whatever reasons. I couldn't cite one case that was my fault, but let me say this first. After Charles and I started working together, and he was on the set every day throughout the shoot, we began to appreciate each other more. At least I began to appreciate Charles, and I think he did me, too. After the film was over and ready for release he did a few things that made me feel like he approved of me. He invited me to attend a private screening of *Cabaret* with he and his young wife. I was wild about *Cabaret*. Charles was not. And when the *New York Times* review of *Sigma* came out (a rave from Howard Thompson), Charles had a blow-up of it made, autographed and framed and presented to me: it was inscribed, 'To David, Hope this is the start of many films together - Charles.' I still have it hanging over the bar. Well, we didn't make any more films together - I don't believe Charles produced any more films. I think he was disillusioned by the film business. But when he was interviewed by a major New York magazine, he was quoted as saying the best director he worked with was me."

"Now this is what I did that might have soured Charles against me in the beginning. I've never told this story, because it would have hurt somebody who was still alive, somebody I liked very much. He's dead now, and I can speak up. The part of the redneck sheriff in *Sigma* was a great part, with a dramatic death scene, the works - a juicy antagonist role. My very good friend Lawrence Tierney was

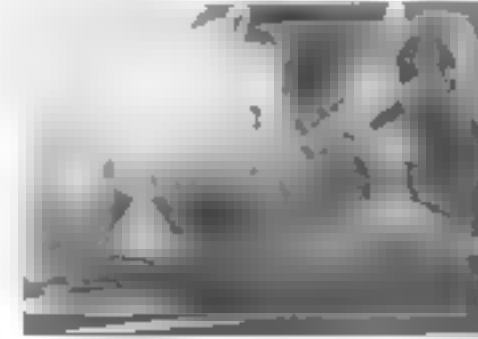


Lynn Lowry brings her strikingly scarred-out demeanour to *I Drink Your Blood*

opposite page: time of the day
Shelley is tenderized in a Satanic charade
that goes too far
Horace Bones feels madness rising within
Rollo takes it to the bridge
Iris Brooks, Ronda Fultz and Lynn Lowry
the feminine contingent of the Sons &
Daughters of Satan
Rollo confronts his Satanic brother
slams his axe into Shelley
and gleats at the result
before taunting Sylvia with the soap-opera

opposite page: bottom left
Horace Bones fends off his demonic
lieutenant, now it's every maniac for himself

bottom right
More foam-flecked mayhem in
I Drink Your Blood





Stigma

perfect for the role. As Larry got older and outgrew all those gangster roles he became a great actor, I mean a natural. He was perfect for the role of the bigoted sheriff. I recommended him to Charles, and because Larry was still a recognised film star, Charles agreed to see him. When I told Larry, he was really excited, because he had already read the script. However, Larry had a drinking problem, so I begged him to stay overnight with me. I had an extra room he used many times. Larry thought it was a good idea. He was nervous about meeting Charles the next morning, and during the night Larry got up and left the house without me knowing it. I called Charles and said Larry had to cancel the appointment for another time. But Larry showed up for the appointment, and he was really drunk. He not only insulted Charles as the producer, but he threatened him. It was really disgraceful, and I literally had to pull Larry out of the office. I apologised to Charles, but Charles only wanted to know if I had known Larry was a serious alcoholic. I had to admit that I had, but he was a friend and I wanted to get him back on his feet. I think this is why Charles and I got off on the wrong foot. I think I would have felt the same way. I must add, however, that Larry did join Alcoholics Anonymous, and stopped drinking. He went on to do some memorable work in such films as *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and *Reservoir Dogs* – and some sober and brilliant work as a guest star on two major TV shows. I'm looking up at Larry's picture on the wall – and he seems to be saying 'It's okay to tell it as it was'. Anyway, Peter Onor took over the role and did a great job with it, probably the best performance of his career.

Fortunately for Durston, the casting of his leading man was not so fraught with difficulties. A young black actor called Philip Michael Thomas, now of course known principally as Tubbs in the hit eighties TV show *Miami Vice*, caught the director's eye and delivered a creditably earnest performance. *Stigma* was his earliest screen role, as Durston recalls. "Yeah Phil was one of a kind. I caught him in an Off Broadway show that was so good it

went to Broadway. This was Phil's first movie. I saw him in the play and went backstage to introduce myself. He was just what I was looking for. Good looking, strong voice, a positive person. I remember he was so excited about the possibility of appearing in a movie, until he found out he wasn't going to be making a million dollars. He would be getting a few hundred above SAG scale. But he did the movie, never complained, was always on the set on time and knew his lines. The fact that he was the tenth took some of the edge off not earning a million dollars. He was happily married at the time and had a beautiful little girl. I allowed him to bring his family to the location. Phil and I stay in touch. When he became a big hit in *Miami Vice* and the girls were all over him, he was asked in a magazine interview, 'What was the happiest time of your life?' Phil replied, 'When I was making *Stigma* with Dave Durston'.

With the script in place, shooting began in late September 1972, lasting eight weeks. The fictional Stillford Island was shot in the picturesque fishing village of Rockport near Gloucester in Massachusetts. In order to avoid offending the locals, the script claimed that the action was taking place not in mainland Rockport itself but an abandoned island off the mainland. Durston's cinematographer this time was Robert Baldwin, who shot John Hancock's chiller *Let's Scare Jessica To Death* (which *Stigma*'s producer Charles Moss also produced). "Bob Baldwin was another lucky break for me," Durston enthuses. "A great person and a good DP. I wasn't on speaking terms with Joe Mangini then, so Charles Moss recommended Baldwin, who had done *Jessica*. To show you how fine a person Baldwin was, one afternoon I wanted to shoot a couple of extra hours to get a beautiful sunset. Charles Moss was on the set every day, and said no. It was an added expense that wasn't necessary. So Baldwin went out on his own one evening, missed his dinner, and filmed me a beautiful sunset."

Like *I Drink Your Blood*, *Stigma* can be said to show a downside to the counter-culture. Where *I Drink Your Blood* if viewed somewhat humourlessly, can be construed as a scare picture about out-of-control hippies, *Stigma* throws a bucket of cold water over the cherished hippie dream of free love and orgasmic revelry. Durston however rejects such interpretations, saying, "I've always been liberal, not too political, however, and recently with the Bush Administration." It's certainly the case that both films share an enlightened approach to issues of race and gender, and freewheeling approach to sexuality. "I had and still have a lot of gay friends. They are a joy to be around. They're witty, have combustible senses of humour, are creative and talented, and also liberal. In my early days we weren't as open about our sexual preferences. It was understood, suggested or suspected, but never discussed openly. Not until the sixties did people start opening up about their sexual orientation. I've never said anything about it, but I'm not ashamed to admit I was bisexual. I realised the best of both sexual drives. Very few one-night stands and only a handful of meaningful affairs, but with some of the most beautiful people in the world. I never went to bed with anybody that I didn't think I would be going to bed with again. I had to love that person as a person, male or female, not as a sex object, and if they felt the same way, the sex was always great. I had to enjoy being with that person, to admire him or her, to have sex. Free love I'm for. Group sex I'm not. And not that I don't know what I'm talking about. When I was younger, I was a clean-cut nice

Stigma

Onor with the resentful D.D. Whitehead

Stigma

Bigoted Sheriff



...young kid, I had an athlete's body, and a fairly sizeable c... and I knew how to use it. I was tuned into one of two of these group sex situations - this was during the war! had the idea of having sex with somebody I had just met, didn't really know, or like - left me cold... man or woman - no matter how beautiful or sexually aggressive they were. Men and we loved men and women have loved women for thousands of years - it just hasn't been very open, but it is and has been a part of life - and will be forever more so why shouldn't I imply it in a script? Is it the character or the action? Sex in films is like violence. It should always be motivated, never just there for shock value. Audiences do not feel or identify with anything that is presented like a pie in the face.

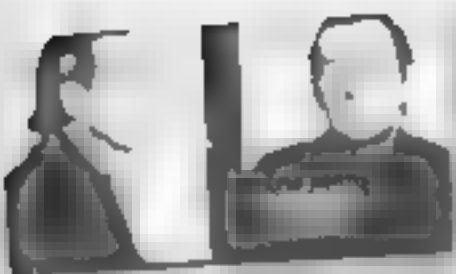
One aspect that does come out of *Stigma* - like a slap in the face, though, is the grisly educational film about advanced syphilis that pops up around the highway marked Durston whether the aim was to shock in a good way or not. "Did you think it was a slap in the face? Not that I didn't worry about it doing just that. But the *New York Times* said the story was sturdy enough to sustain the graphic lecture. The film came from the Medical Examiner's office, a 16mm educational film. They had it so helpful, and asked if I could insert it in the script - might do some good! Mind you, up to this point even wasn't taking V.D. very serious. The Medical Examiner said that was the major problem with teenagers. They weren't taking the infection seriously. They were laughing at it. They convinced me it would give weight to the subject matter of the film. I didn't, however, use their narration, I wrote my own. But from the beginning this was my worry - that audiences were not going to take V.D. seriously. Thankfully, the news and media were playing up a new European strain of V.D., using the old scare tactics so why shouldn't I? If I do say so myself, I think my idea of getting Cousin Bruce, as the presenter delivering the lecture, was brilliant. At that time, he had the ear of every teenager in the country. The rating on his daily program was very high, and rock records became hits. If Bruce played them on his show and recommended them, unfortunately the MPAA stepped in and gave the film an R rating, preventing teenagers from seeing it, but many walked past the ticket taker on the door. One critic said, "Despite the R rating, *Stigma* is a film that should be seen by teenagers" - and another suggested it should be shown in classrooms. Nobody - not me, not Charles, expected the rave reviews the film got. We were in shock. We had been afraid that my reputation from *I Drink Your Blood* was going to backfire on this film, but it didn't.

The plot strand involving a country eat-house whose whores turn out to have a clean bill of health, against the grain of our expectations, is certainly far more liberal than one might expect from the frequently reactionary exploitation movie scene - although Durston makes a distinction between urban and country prostitutes that shows he's no Almodovar on the subject. "What I was going after was that the whore in the urban bar was a bitch, a mind destroyed by the hatred, the greed, the desperation of trying to survive in the city. I wanted to show the difference between the hardness of city prostitutes, as opposed to the domesticated, normal function of sex in country prostitutes. In urban life a mind can become warped, in suburban life the mind remains on normal healthy functions of the human body and mind. That's what these scenes were trying to say."



One curious feature of Durston's career is that both *I Drink Your Blood* and *Stigma* propose themes that the better-known Canadian director David Cronenberg explored soon after in his 'venereal horror' film *Shivers* (1975), and its follow-up *Rabid* (1976). Durston says, "I have never met David Cronenberg, but I have admired some of his work. I don't know if it is true or not, but I read that he admits to seeing *I Drink Your Blood* five times." *Stigma*, which was





David Durston in what must be the most generous producer's photo in this book. Of a felony charge in 1975.

1975: 33 Drink Your Blood's Horror scenes - the role for which he will always be



released to cinemas at August 1973, beat *Shivers* to the screen by two years, although Cronenberg has said that his script for *Shivers* was written two years before it finally went into production, making it contemporaneous with *Stigma*. He also says that whilst on a trip to California he met with Corman protégé Jonathan Demme - who revealed that Canadian producers Cineplex, for whom Cronenberg had written *Shivers*, had been touting his script around Hollywood, looking for a director other than the commercially untested Cronenberg himself.

Now, it's hardly necessary to suspect either David Cronenberg or David Durston of 'borrowing' from the other's work - even if the sudden appearance of two horror films about the spread of venereal disease written in the same year is quite a coincidence, given the *outré* nature of the subject. What is striking, however, is that the topic of Cronenberg's follow-up to *Shivers*, the excellent horror-thriller *Rabid*, is also anticipated by Durston's movie. Not only do both *Rabid* and *I Drink Your Blood* feature rabies-infected people attacking 'straight' society, but they also feature key scenes of a woman infecting men with rabies through sexual (or in the case of *Rabid*, quasi-sexual) contact. What's more, both films feature the beautiful, wildlike actress Lynn Lowry! This time there's no question which story was written first. Durston's script predates *Rabid* by several years and Cronenberg has never suggested that *Rabid* was written before *Shivers*. It does seem plausible that Cronenberg, who has always denied cinematic inspirations for his movies, preferring to cite literary figures

• William Burroughs and Vladimir Nabokov, should have seen *I Drink Your Blood* sometime in the early seventies, and then either forgotten it or decided to take the central premise (along with Lynn Lowry), and develop his own (it must be said, very individual) slant on the subject.

Phantom Projects

With *Stigma* performing modestly at the box office, Durston turned briefly to the adult film world with *Boysnapped* (1975). However, the project proved to be more trouble than it was worth. "We were filming a fire escape scene on a Saturday, featuring a man with a gun, but the prop man had failed to get to the office where filmmakers can rent weapons and get a license to use them with blanks, before they closed on Friday evening. So he brought me a water pistol from Woolworths. It was as phoney as a three dollar bill. I refused to use it. I wanted the scene authentic, low budget film be damned! I went to a friend of mine who had dealings with the Mafia. He loaned me an unlicensed gun. He warned me, however, to never admit where I got the gun, if I should get caught with it on me. God, what a sense I was taking. What if the gun was used to kill somebody? But I didn't think of that. The scene had to be authentic looking. The Saturday we shot the scene, I gave the gun to the actor a minute before the scene was shot, outside the tenement building we were using. The actor was to chase someone up a fire escape to the roof with a gun in his hand. That was it. And it was shot in one take. But a senile old woman saw the actor run her kitchen window and called the police. Ten minutes after the scene was in the can and we returned inside, the tenement was surrounded by three patrol cars and we were invaded. The NYPD had enough sense to realize we were shooting a movie - they saw the camera equipment and the crew, recognized the men as actors in make-up. The first thing they said was

'Who's in charge?' I knew I was in trouble. I introduced myself, started to explain we were just shooting a movie outside. They didn't want to hear that. They were way ahead of me. 'Where's the gun you were using?' The actor had given it back to me as soon as the scene wrapped. I had to give it to them. They wanted to know if it was my gun and did I have a license to carry it? I admitted the gun was not licensed to me - and I didn't have a license. That's a felony! I was handcuffed and taken to the station house, photographed and fingerprinted, and locked in a cell, at the infamous Tombs Prison to await a trial hearing. In the cell with me was a Hispanic, who had been in a knife fight. His nose was cut, and it was bleeding as he tried to hold a small piece of flesh onto the nose until he could get medical attention. The Tombs was overcrowded, as it always was. The stench was terrible. My attorney got me into Night Court that evening. The Judge knew of me from some of the TV shows I did, that he and his wife watched. He reduced the felony charge to a misdemeanour. I was only using the gun as a prop - and an investigation proved they were not looking for that gun in any murder case. I was off the hook and allowed to have my mug-shots removed from their files, so I had no record. I was fined fifty bucks and released. But God what an experience."

Keen to put this encounter with the authorities behind him, Durston began making plans in the Autumn of 1975 for a new feature film, based on a script he'd written called *Lord of the Dead*. The story tells of a revolution that occurs on a small island, and the incoming revolutionaries' attempts to track down and kill rebel opposition forces by using a traditional cult among the islanders. Durston explains why this project never made it to the screen: "My nephew, John 'Jack' Damon formed a company and partnership to do *Lord of the Dead*, to be filmed in Trinidad. Jack Damon was producing. I wrote the screenplay and was directing, and I called in Jacques Demarecaux as DP. Eike Sommer and John Forsythe were to be in it. Jacques accompanied Jack and me to Trinidad to select locations. Jack rented a small plane for us to survey the island - the forest and mountains of which there were many. It was a wild bumpy flight and in that small plane, it could have been risky. However we landed safely, and Jacques went right back to his hotel room and went to bed. He had not told us he had a heart condition. To him it was as if he would be letting us down. The hotel doctor suggested we get him back to New York a.s.a.p. We left that night. Two weeks later Jacques was dead. *Lord of the Dead* was never produced, although there is some confusion as somebody else took the title."

Although Durston's filmography ends in the mid-seventies, he battled on through the following two decades, trying to mount an ambitious slate of projects that, had they reached fruition, would have shown him in a much broader light. In 1978 he signed a deal with Pathe Pictures International in New York to adapt Erle Bradford's massive historic journal *The Great Siege - Malta 1565*. As he recalls, it was a highly prestigious project: "I was flown to Malta, where I was put up in a suite at a luxurious hotel, and lived like a King for two months researching the history of the great siege, which entailed a small unit of the Knights of Malta, say ninety or a hundred, who with the aid of a handful of Maltese natives, including some women, fought off two hundred thousand Turks. Kenneth Rooney, who was connected with Pathe Pictures, was also a member of the Knights of Malta. I was invited to the President's Palace and spent an evening with the President, who was a great guy.

The Devil is a Dancer - A Tribute to Bhaskar



The Devil is a Dancer is a tribute to Bhaskar, a man who has been a part of the film industry for over 40 years. He has been a part of some of the most iconic films of the industry, and his performance in The Devil is a Dancer is a testament to his talent and dedication. The film is a tribute to his life and work, and it is a must-watch for anyone who loves cinema.

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he featured in

with a wild sense of humor. After my research was complete and a treatment compiled, almost scene for scene, I was presented with a gold-plated Knight of Malta cross and chain, and I went back to New York to start on the script. Rooney said: "You're working for Pathe Pictures from here on. We complete this one, and go on to the next one. Nothing was low-budget with Kenneth Rooney. He was tall, handsome, and built like a football player. He was born in Brooklyn, but dealing with the international set he had great manners, and was very diplomatic and poised. The production budget was somewhere in the neighborhood of \$150 million, with a cast of twelve international stars. Jack Cardiff was to be our director of photography. It took me almost nine months to complete the script, which came to 189 pages. But there was great trouble trying to get it off the ground. Trouble with so many stars not being available at the same time, and for so many weeks. Then the Knights of Malta Committee would not allow one of the Knights in the script to bed a native girl who gets pregnant and commits suicide. Well, that had to go – no fucking and no suicides in our Society. They could kill but they couldn't fuck." Kenneth Rooney, though, had a mind of his own. He thought the Knights should be shown the way they really

lived in those days. There was a clash of minds and temperaments. I took the first draft of the script to Charlton Heston, who was considered for one of the starring parts, and instead of being honored he was insulted that I would present him with a 189-page script. I said it was a first draft and that the first draft of *Gone with the Wind* was over 200 pages! Anyway, it ended on a bad note. After over a year, it was decided the picture was too big and expensive to produce. I stayed in touch with Kenneth Rooney for a few years more, tried to get him interested in doing a low-budget horror, or a thriller. But it didn't fire him up.

In the early 1980s Durston became interested in the Fox Sisters, two uneducated farm girls from Rochester, New York State who became world famous in the mid-19th Century as mediums, and around whom the founders of Spiritualism gathered. The sisters appeared before Kings, Queens and Presidents, before sinking into a later life marred by alcoholism, discord and penury. Durston recalls: "Somebody gave me a copy of a book about them, and I was fascinated. What an incredible life they had, much of scary – some of it blows your mind. I started writing a script, 'The Walls Are Listening.' About 1983 I started getting involved in mounting this as a 3-part TV mini-series, with a cast of many stars. I had plenty of money – I started a corporation, The Seven Summits Group. My nephew, Jack Damon, helped me, and became a partner. We got the networks interested, but eventually they all shied away from it as too big, with locations in New England, New York, London, Paris, Cuba, and a battle sequence during the Civil War.

After this potentially fascinating project fell through, Durston hovered on the verge of *Canute's Holocaust* territory with another intriguing story idea. "My friend John Peverall became interested in a script called 'Souls and Savages' that I wrote for John Huston and producer Henry Blanke (*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*). It was put on the shelf after Mr. Blanke died in 1981, but then restored with a new title, *Savage's Apprentice*. Peverall had an investor and we went off to Belém, Brazil, up the wild Amazon (before it was destroyed) to spot locations and make friends with a friendly tribe. This was in August 1986. We were there four weeks before pre-production came to a halt over creative differences. The script had a great deal of horror and violence between the savages and 'civilized' folk, though if I may say so it was a strong, valid drama, based on fact. But I think the backers were just looking for tits and ass amongst the natives.

In 1992, Paragon Arts International contracted John Peverall, as producer and Durston as writer to adapt for the screen the 'life of Belgian ecclesiastical hero Father Damien, the so-called 'Leper Priest' – it was, as Durston recalls, another big story – I got paid to write, but I didn't have control over the production. The script went from Paragon Arts to TriStar to Warners. Robin Williams was even approached, and agreed to play Father Damien – but again nothing came of it." (A film was eventually made on the subject in 1999: *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien*, directed by Paul Cox and written by Cry-Freedom screenwriter John Briley).

It's funny to think that in a parallel world David Durston's reputation expanded to include major historical dramas, anthropological action adventures and religious biopics. He must have seen these phantom productions in his mind's eye many times – we can only regret that we can't see them too. What still remains, though, is Durston

small: Boom Town
a Flat, Her Highness and the
Seaboy, The Strange Woman, Samson
and The... was one of Durston's closest
... seen from this



erred in the movies. The dance-and-music album of the origins of life helped to raise Bhaskar's profile in the USA: "It won a Cannes Film Festival award and was nominated for an Academy Award in America. In 1961, God creates Man and Woman, and he has

and says, 'Okay, go on and kill yourselves!' It was a cute little movie."

After travelling to England a few times for several dance concerts at The Lambeth Theatre (1965), glamorous Indian dance legend, Surina Kumari. Numerous foreign

a cheek thing, but it became serious at times. With all that blood it was a serious

is the saying goes:

While shooting *Drink Your Blood*, the cast found themselves as ostracised as their

well, but we were isolated because the townsfolk wouldn't let us come down into the town! They thought we were all crazy people who would go down there and corrupt

a dancer you're immediately categorised, you know, you can imagine, but I was

trained a little bit of kung-fu and karate, so I could take care of myself!

Drink Your Blood fell down. The publicity was so poorly done. You looked at the poster and

film, like Durston, less than thrilled by producer Jerry Brunell's decision to pair the film

Naam and I... what are we talking about, a Catholic Mass?

Some of his smoother, better colleagues raised an eyebrow at Bhaskar: "What

doing Bhaskar? And I said, 'I'm making a movie, what do you want from me? Dance

concerts don't make enough, and I've got to make a living.' He also received

and spice my dear, come and take a look at me!" He laughed at the memory, adding:

"There are some weird people in this world!"

After his brush with screen infamy, Bhaskar continued to dance for the theatre. In



that, and moved on... started painting. I had an exhibition in New York, and I

"I'm afraid it's probably too munchy for public!"

weeks before his death, and he was thrilled that *Drink Your Blood* was being

afterthoughts. The film may only have been a short diversion from his dance-work

work in theatre and cinema, but he was immensely gratified that it was so well

...I lost one foot of Bhaskar

his creator, laughing out at us again and again.

David Durston adds:

associate, Tony France, arranged for him to see the DVD of *Drink Your Blood* at the

and guff. He also read all the reviews and the good things they said about him. He was



David Geffen at a recent revival of *I Drink Your Blood* (left) and Durston (right)

David Geffen at Grindhouse



astonishing energy and spirit. In 2003, when *I Drink Your Blood* received its first DVD release, Durston happily took centre stage, and his charismatic contribution to the extras package made the disc a must-have for fans. Later that year when Grindhouse Entertainment arranged a theatrical screening of the film in L.A., Durston was there in person to meet an adoring audience. Currently in his eighties, he is amazingly vigorous to his fans and exudes a degree of vitality that suggests a man very happy with his life. If he suffers ailments and pains you would never know it, as he is far more likely to fret over others than himself. Among several scripts he's written recently, a horror tale called *Leech* sounds the most likely to carry on the gory trade of the early seventies work. "It deals with a horde of vampire leeches that invade in the thousands during the mating season," explains Durston. "The vampire leech is a reality. It's technical term is the Haemadipsa, the most feared of blood-sucking leeches, because if it attaches itself to an

animal or human, who is unconscious, drunk, drugged or in a deep sleep, these suckers can drain every ounce of blood out of your body within five hours and that victim never knows it. He's dead. Okay it's outlandish, but it's good for a scare and the Haemadipsa is a reality."

Whilst it would be a pleasure to see a Durston return to the big screen again, especially one as potentially gruesome and thrilling as *Leech*, the director has already made an indelible mark on the flesh of the horror genre – so here's Bloody Mary to a consummate showbiz professional, and the man who gave us *I Drink Your Blood*, a seminal and unforgettable exploitation classic. Cheers, David!

1 Dr. Timothy Leary's escalating series of open-house drug experiments at Harvard are fascinatingly described in Jay Stevens's book *Sturmung Heaven*.

2 The title song has a mellow swing to it that resembles T. Platters, and it's one of the film's foremost charms. It was written by R'n'B legend Sylvester Bradford, who with Al Lewis wrote the Fat Domino classic *Blueberry Hill* and wrote Vincent's *Right Now*, and whose song *Tears on My Pillow* appears on the soundtrack.

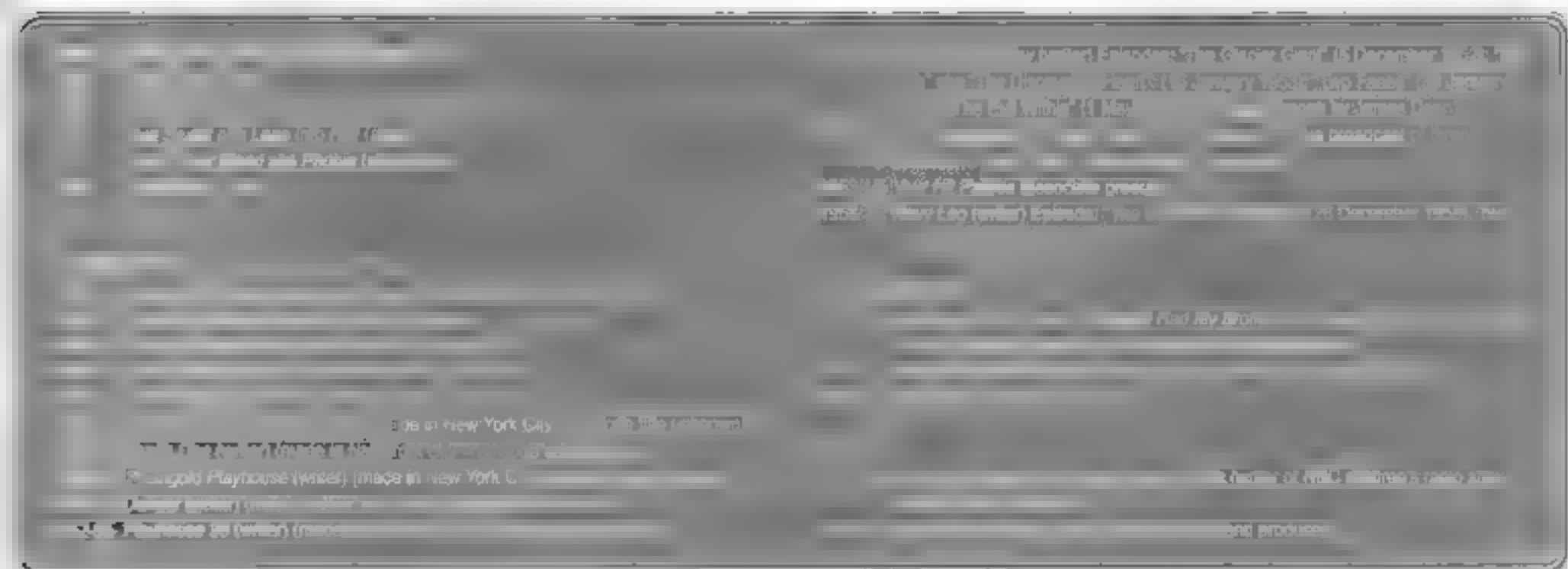
3 Ten years later, the producers of the aging John Huston smorgasbord *Phobia* threatened legal action against such maestro Armand Weston, who tried to release a horror film with the same name the following year. Weston's *Phobia* became *The Fear*, and it's a real shame.

4 Mangue's horror credits include *Squirm*, *Alligator*, *Alone in the Dark* and *Mother's Day*.

5 I've been unable to trace this statement.

6 Yma Sumac is a Peruvian singer whose real name was changed by Capitol Records to make it sound more exotic.

7 *The Creation of Woman* is available as an extra on the DVD release of *The Householder* (1963), Roman Polanski's first film as director. James was



Don't Make Me Do Anything Bad, Mother...

Philip Ellison on *Don't Go in the House*

Don't Go in the House (1979)

Along with William Lustig's *Mamae* this is my favourite stalk-and-slash film, or perhaps I should say torch-and-stash (in this case? Ellison's grim tale of a sadistic kidnapping woman in order to burn them with a flamethrower in a purpose-built steel room is seemingly interested in turning its nastiness into *Halloween*-ish fun; and I'm sorry, but I like that in a movie. It's a film I've watched so often the neighbours are nervous, but what can I say – every time I see it, I'm struck by its powerful combination of violence, humour and genuine creepiness.

Ellison treads a knife-edge with the depiction of Donny Kohler (Dan Grimaldi), who is such a pathetic creature even *Mamae*'s Joe Spinell might have asked for re-writes. The victim of a cruel mother (Ruth Dardick) who punished him by holding his arms over the flames of a gas cooker, Donny can't so much as glance at a box of matches without suffering flashbacks to the abuse. Returning from work one day after witnessing an accident in which a fellow worker suffered severe burns, he discovers his mother has finally croaked. Free at last, he runs gleefully round the house playing loud music and jumping up and down on soft armchairs like a naughty child left alone for the weekend. Relief turns to terror though, when he hears Mother's hated voice calling his name. She's still dead, but Donny has a lot of problems 'upstairs' in the form of whispering voices hissing murderous suggestions in his head. With pain, punishment and fire well-and-truly branded into his mind, he sets out to enact a few variations on the theme himself, turning an upstairs room of Mother's rambling old house into a steel-walled flameproof prison.

The film arches from the macabre to the sadistic when Donny tricks a young woman called Kathy Jordan (Johanna Brushay aka Debra Richmond) back to his house and bashes her round the head with a fire iron. She comes to in the steel-lined room, naked, and dangling by her wrists from the ceiling. In a protracted sequence that draws out the preparations to a shuddersome degree, Donny wearing a heavy asbestos suit that obscures his features – douses his shrieking victim with petrol. As the music cranks the tension to the extreme, he pauses – then blasts

her naked body with a flamethrower. She dies screaming and writhing in flames. It's one of the most outrageous scenes ever to feature in a horror film. Appallingly convincing, it takes the viewer through shock into a kind of stunned admiration.

For a while it seems Ellison may have shot his bolt with this excessive sequence, but when he doesn't show us anything quite so shocking again, other qualities hold our attention. Donny carries on killing, collecting the charred corpses of his female victims and dressing them up in his mother's old frocks, sitting them together in armchairs like attendees of some post-apocalyptic Tupperware party. The voices in his head identify themselves with the burnt victims, and Donny has conversations with them as if they

The Kohler house



DON'T GO IN THE HOUSE

Certificate: 'X'

were his guests. Is it just paranoia, or are they sniggering at him when his back's turned? Soon Donny's pyromaniac wet dreams turn to nightmares about being dragged down into the earth by his frazzled victims. He starts to get seriously freaked out by his own House of Horrors (one wonders if killers like Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer or Robert Berdella had the same trouble), and is forced by panic into attempting a social life – he accepts the friendly overtures of a workmate, Bobby (Robert Ostr) who invites him on a disco double date with two girls.

In case you were wondering what's so funny about all this, the following sequence delivers a welcome pinch of camp humour. Dreaming his forthcoming disco-date but eager to get out of the house, Donny wanders into town. After catching a glimpse of himself in a shop window, clad in the same dreary windcheater and jeans he's been wearing throughout the film, he wanders nervously into a gentlemen's tailors to buy something more suited to the dance floor. He's swiftly pounced upon by the sa-o-offhand sales assistant (David McComb), who puts

"Why don't you let me set you up with an entire ensemble?" Donny asks about a gartish red shirt he'd seen a woman examining, pretending to recognise its brand name ("The Matador") when the assistant uses it. "To tell you the truth, she thought it was tacky," snaps the salesman. Recognising a Grade A sucker, he soon has Donny bamboozled with his expensive recommendations. "Ahem... especially made for dancing. Elastic thread in the seams."

Lovers of seventies disco-tack will cherish the gauche psychos subsequent night out. Struggling within the restraints of a low budget, Elison points his camera doggedly up from floor level to conceal how few extras there are. Donny tries to fit in with the daunc game socialising for the first time in his life and even trading lame puns with Bobby and the two girls he's brought with him. However, when his date tries to lure him onto the dance floor, she makes the mistake of pulling at his strobe-lit arms, stirring up memories of Donny's childhood punishments. He freaks, and I don't mean

"C'est chic"!), hurling a table candle at his unsuspecting date. As a frenzied disco song belts out on the soundtrack she staggers round the dance floor screaming, with her lavish hairdo in flames. It's a scene both horrible and hilarious, giving new meaning to the phrase 'bad hair day' and providing the film's second best set-piece. What a pity they couldn't have stumped up for *Disco Inferno* on the soundtrack!

Donny 'hot-foots' it out of the club pursued by the girl's enraged brother, but even after taking a beating he stubbornly persists in picking up two drunken girls and inviting them back to his house for a party. Squeamish viewers will be fearing the worst, but as the story draws to a climax Elison fights shy of further sadism, instead returning to the macabre tableaux of burnt bodies for his finale.

Don't Go in the House is an accomplished, atmospheric horror story that sustains a genuine mood of unease. It has one unforgettable explosion of violence which pulls the viewer up short in astonishment, but for me the film really does work as a whole. There's a unity of mood and purpose that speaks of a director firmly in control of his material. The movie was filmed in winter and benefits from a canny contrast between frosty location work – a scene outside the incinerator plant where Donny

works is particularly effective), and the awful fiery fate of the victims. The photography adds to the chill, with many scenes shot in varying degrees of blue, culminating in Donny's deep-blue-tinted nightmares. Juxtaposing cold and fire throughout, Oliver Wood's deep-freeze photography provides a visual analogue for the story's extremes. If you compare the film with a superficially similar shocker of the period, like *The Toolbox Murders*, you'll see that even though both films feature extreme violence in urban locations, Elison's direction and the simple but effective fire and iceiness of the cinematography pull theme and treatment together, whereas *Toolbox* lacks an aesthetic dimension and, apart from its brutal slayings, looks pretty run-of-the-mill.

There's something so compellingly despondent about much of the story, and Grimaldi's 'loser' performance has real emotional integrity. Alan Jones rightly described Grimaldi as "a low-rent Dustin Hoffman" when he reviewed the film for *Starburst* back in 1981. But while Jones saw nothing else to recommend, I have to disagree: simple and derivative though the plot may be, this alarming film-flambe has an undertow completely absent from the more mechanical slasher flicks of the period (Tony Maylam's *The Burning* for instance, a film that pipped Elison's at the post for the *reductio ad nauseum* title but which fizzles out of your memory with only a handful of severed fingers to show it was ever there). Joining the superior ranks of horror tales like Abe Ferrara's *The Drifter Killer*, Mel Zarch's *I Spit on Your Grave* and the aforementioned *Maniac*, Elison serves us a story that's both satirical and sombre – one of my favourite combinations. It seems to me that stories revolving around extreme cruelty ought to weight their prurience with some measure of bleakness. The failing of a film like *Bumby* (2002), a recent attempt to mine the serial killer theme, is its moral cowardice: treating atrocities with the same self-satisfied sick humour that gave us serial killer playing cards and 'World's Coolest Killers' websites. By contrast, the few moments of humour in *Don't Go in the House* are chiefly at the expense of the killer, which really does make all the difference.

The aforementioned disco scenes may bear the hall mark of a low-budget production whose reach has exceeded its grasp, but in general the small cast is turned to the film's advantage. It helps us to understand how Donny's evil mother, and his consequent hatred of women, have cut him off from social interaction. One shot that always comes to mind when I think of this film is a deep-focus image of Donny simply walking along a jetty, with lowering grey clouds above a deep blue sea whipped into foaming waves. Scenes where Donny visits a lone priest in an otherwise empty church, or wanders disconsolately around town after the shops have closed, are as memorable in their way as the violent set-pieces. As I said, the killer is both pathetic and terrifying, utterly sunk in his psychosis, but lacking the swagger and intellect of the clichéd movie psychopath. His abductions of women are the result of wheedling, forlorn persistence rather than cunning. He certainly knows what he intends to do and is therefore a genuinely chilling figure, but his abductions work despite him, not because he's a born predator. All of which means that neither Grimaldi's performance nor Elison and Hammill's screenplay panders to a vicarious identification with the killer.



Ellison in Hollywood



So many people hated that movie. There were a few good reviews, but you could easily count them on one hand. And the bad reviews were vehement.

Joseph Ellison on Don't Go in the House

As if the grammatically inelegant title, the blatant thefts from Hitchcock [1], and the voyeuristic female nudity were not enough, *Don't Go in the House* makes matters even worse by its cynical pretence at an anti-ethnicist use of images. *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia: Horror*

"A real sick one. For fans of *Murder on 34th*."

Michael Weldon: The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film

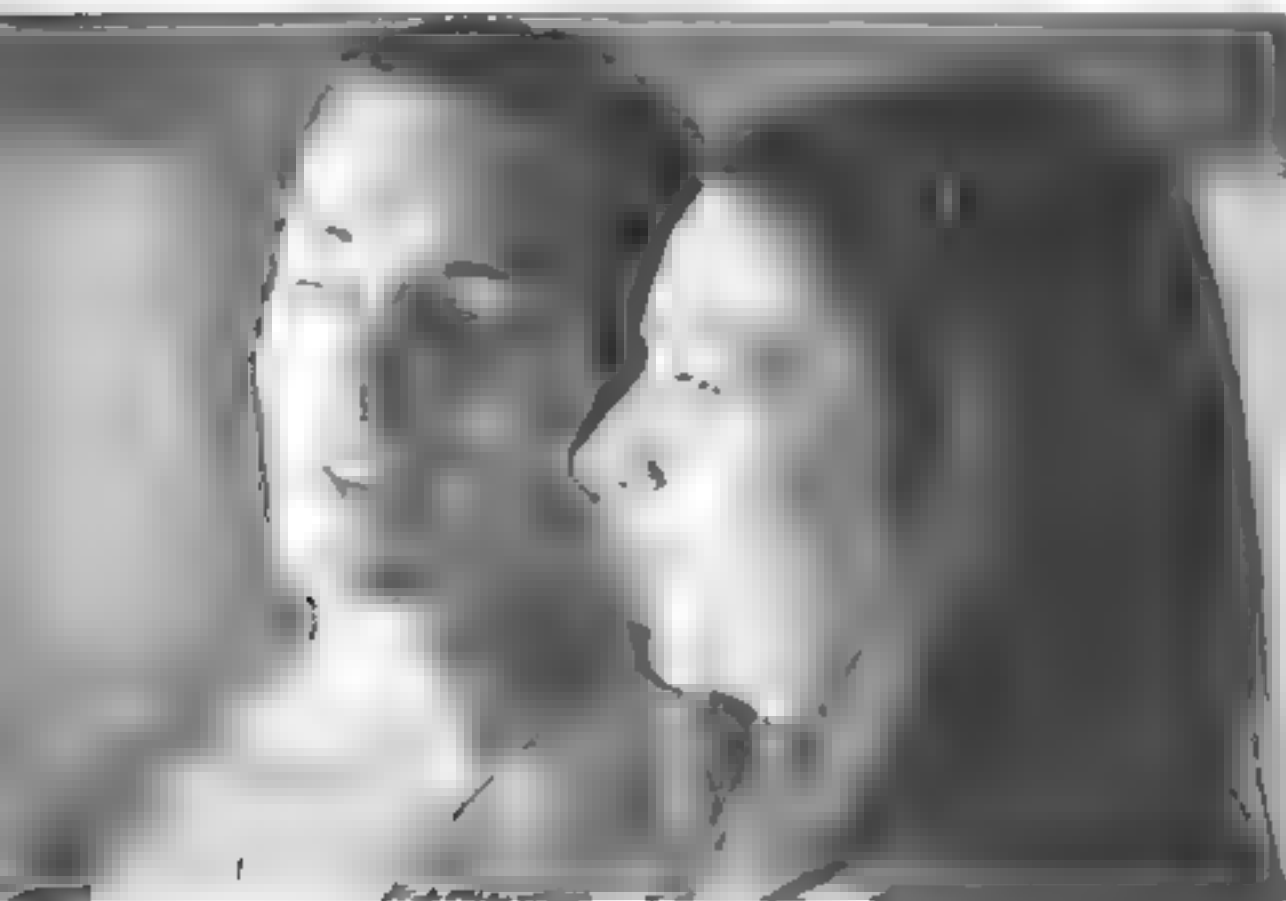
Sickening rubbish

Film's Guide to Films on Video

Joseph Ellison's *Don't Go in the House* may be taken as representing the cycle at its most debased.

Robin Wood, 'Returning the Look: Eyes of a Stranger'

Joseph Ellison, like Hitchcock, has a sense of humor about the way his infamous horror movie has been vilified over the years. However, it's over twenty-five years since the film was released, and Ellison is far from preoccupied with bad reviews. After his second feature film, a romantic coming-of-age drama called *Joey* (1986) failed to find an audience (it's been snarled up in rights-clearance purgatory ever since), Ellison returned to his first love, music. Today he's a singer-songwriter specialising in a contemporary brand of country rock. R'n'B. Although his movie-making days are well behind him, he was happy to speak to a true fan of *Don't Go in the House*, and describes here how one of the most shocking horror tales of the 1970s came about.



Early Days

Joseph Ellison was born in Manhattan in 1949, and before film – certainly long before the sort of extreme horror which he became infamous – he was drawn to music. Indeed, he believes music shaped his sensibilities even earlier. "I was boppin' to the muffled melodies of Hank Williams, Thelonious Monk and The Magnific Sisters wailing through the placenta walls," he says. Other than this pre-natal recollection, however, family history is something he feels is largely irrelevant to his filmmaking. "I was partly raised by a Texan, a great man, a redneck raised in the old ways, but he wasn't a bigot. He taught me so much about women, and he was a great role model: he taught me all about that culture from a very early age. Was not just a typical New York kid? I lived in Manhattan and Tallahassee, I lived in Virginia and DC. I lived in Connecticut for a year. I moved round quite a bit. I had a very broad spectrum of experience. I had sort of a caucous youth, I was in trouble a little bit, and, let's put it this way – I got help when there was a crisis. My mom really stepped up when I was in a jam at fourteen. I've got to tell you, she was nothing like Mrs. Kohler! It worked out okay. Life's been good to me, so far."

The possibilities of cinema first made an impact on Ellison during high school, as he vividly recalls. "On a rain-soaked November night, a fellow classmate, chemical enthusiast and I happened into the RKO on 23rd Street to view a film from Italy, *Juliet of the Spirits*. The opening titles roared. Nino Rota's spooky organ music played. I was hypnotised. Brilliant sounds, surreal scenes and psychedelic drugs produced an event more special than the Oscars. A life-altering experience! Standing on the platform that night waiting for the Double A train, I knew. I must make art like this. Wild images, dazzling colour, outrageous music, all mushing together like huskies led by Balto himself to speed the sled, bearing life-saving soul medicine to the ice-bound and blue needy of the world. Just a stoner trying to carry the message!"

Watching the new Fellini on drugs, in the '60s? "Leadly stuff indeed, and, with the Italian maestro at the height of his powers, hundreds of would-be film directors must have emerged from *Juliet of the Spirits* or *8 1/2* or *Satyricon*, knocked off their feet – just like Ellison, dreaming of creating their own such wonders.

And, as often when the psychedelic shuttle lands and the reveller returns to *terra firma*, the morning after brought a slight recalibration of priorities. Ellison dryly reflects, "Another wannabe film maker would have picked up an 8mm camera and produced his first Academy Award-winning short that very night. I, however, was busy bluffing my way through high school, working in the hardware store on 8th Avenue, playing gigs with my band, chasing girls, and indulging in aforementioned chemical experiments.

Hedonism aside, the gigs were Ellison's mainline. As one of 'Wayne and the Exceptions' he recorded a single 'Have Faith' and went on tour. "The band was black except for me," Ellison recalls. "Just the six of us, trying our best to sound like James Brown and the Famous Flames and his thirty piece band. People liked us and we worked all the time. We toured the South not long after Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner were murdered there. There were still separate black and white facilities, even though they had been outlawed. The black audiences loved

The white café owners didn't, especially when we tried to serve breakfast together. We recorded or performed and hit the charts. But the band broke up when I was 16, then another member had to run from the authorities. "I'd've joined or started another group but I couldn't understand why I was only able to sound like Sonny Curtis or Charlie Parker for a few notes and then it was over." It never occurred to me that they practiced eleven or twelve hours a day. I practiced, on average, zero. Depressed and downhearted I took to cloud nine.

Despite his dreamer temperament, Ellison graduated from high school and went to George Washington University in Washington, DC. It was here that Ellison developed skills that would lead him to the film industry, studying drama and stagecraft with the University drama department who recruited him to provide music and lighting for their productions. This in turn led to a job with the National Ballet, "touring the South again, only this time as an assistant stage manager. I drove the truck, loaded in the morning, worked the day, then drove to the next town and did it again. When I returned to DC for some sleep, I landed a job as a PA with a production company doing Texaco spots for Jack Benny and Dennis Day in Virginia."

With a spell in the music industry and the theatre already under his belt, Ellison turned his attention to the cinema. "I went to see classic and current movies several times a week, and by the time I transferred to NYU I was committed to being a filmmaker. I moved to New York and studied acting with Lee Strasberg and his crew in 1970-71. There was a short man who would attack with the ferocity of a rabid raccoon if you made an artistic choice he did not approve of." Ellison remembers to this day. "An embarrassing trip with flying egos, but after more than a year of that I thought I had a handle on directing. In the end, and a half I was at NYU. I took every film course I could, and graduated."

Enter the Dubber

After leaving NYU in 1971 determined to get involved in the film industry, Ellison gravitated to post-production sound work. "I had learned how to do post-synch and dubbing at the University. So when I went up for an audition to dub Italian films into English, I got the job. Humble beginnings indeed, but I was working in film. Italian film! 35mm!" It was at this time that he made his first short. "A young blonde European woman I knew invited me to Jones Beach. We drove out there at 100mph in her GTO convertible. On the sand, she offered me a new Alfa Romeo if I would marry her. I was completely confused until she explained that she wanted to be a US citizen. I didn't go for it. But I did make a short 8mm film that day using her camera. I shot in sequence. It had some beach elements and the sea. I used her as two different male characters and it worked. It was my first film. With a claim for modesty that Fellini would have approved, he adds, "I think Federico would have liked it."

In 1973 Ellison was still dabbling with other career options. "I was trying to be an actor, but it was very short-lived. I was doing nothing exciting to tell you, except that George Romero wanted to cast me in *The Crazies*, and I read for it on video. I did an audition, and then I was on the road with the Harkness Ballet in Alabama, putting up shows. I was hired from Romero's assistant, and she says, 'Mr. Romero likes you for the part and would like to see you'."

Don't Make Me Do Anything Bad, Mother



again." And I said, "I'm in Alabama, I'm working a job, and it's going to take me through another month and a half. I could conceivably fly back, but I'd really be putting them in the lurch here. Is there any assurance?" How close am I?" She said, "It's down to you and two other guys, and he really favours you, but I really can't guarantee anything." Ellison let the opportunity go and stayed to finish his job in Alabama. "But I really never considered myself an actor anyway. I was doing it for the experience, to know how to handle myself and to learn about film. I'm not an actor type. I'm a musician, I'm very unambitious when it comes to playing music, not for the self-aggrandisement of getting up in front of people but to share the music. That's where I'm comfortable. With acting, I become very self-conscious."

Ellison was hungry for more filmmaking experience however it would be several years yet before his first feature materialised. In the meantime, he took whatever work he could to keep the wolf from the door. "Simon Nuchtern ran a great little production and post-production house in the Technicolor building. It was a wonderful place to get your hands on 35mm film and equipment. He approached me to dub, re-mix, score and re-edit movies that he and his clients would bring in from overseas. It was an excellent training ground. He was an editor, DP, tech wiz. It was there I had the opportunity to do all kinds of work on features, industrials, Hanna Barbera cartoons." Ellison worked on scores of titles that passed through Nuchtern's company: "I could never remember all the projects we did there," he laughs. "Sometimes I would come onto a picture where Simon had already done some work on it and pulled the title." Among the films Ellison recalls dubbing are *The Bad Guyant* (dir. Simon Nuchtern, 1976), *Revenge of the Streetfighter* (aka *The Streetfighter's Last Revenge* dir. Shigehiro Ozawa, 1974), and the Bruce Lee biopic *Bruce Lee: The True Story* (1976) in which he voiced the actor playing Lee, Bruce Lee (real name Ho Chung Tsoi).



Another GTO Films press shot

You hear that
agent! Dennis Kohlenstein
of the multi-... Don't Go in the House



new York 314

Nuchtern's August Films handled a very wide range of film projects. This being New York in the 1970s, some were more 'august' than others, as Ellison explains: "We had every kind of movie coming through that place at the time. I remember at August you'd be showing a client (from say Ingersoll Rand,) through the place, and we'd be talking about drill bits and oil pumps, and you'd look in on the editing suites and somebody would have something on the screen that, 'Oh my God! Oh excuse me sorry,' and you'd quickly move onto the next door! It was just stunning what was going on up there! But the reason you didn't just cut and run was it was a place where you could get your hands on 35mm and real work with film, and where the hell were you going to do that in NYC? There was a very small film community there and you were lucky to be in on it. Your clients would be United Artists, or you'd have really prestigious films like the IMAX film *To Fly*, and also the sleazy guy down the hall who needed Simon to sync up the tracks for his porno film. I mean, it was amazing. A lot of people who went places went through there, and then there were a few people who were probably doing really bizarre things, too.

Ellison found the experience of working with Nuchtern immensely enjoyable: "Simon was a very nice person to work with. I was really struggling in those days and he said to me, 'You know how to dub movies, don't you? Well I've always wanted to do that here, so how would you like to run my dubbing service? I'll get all the obs, and you do all the work, and we'll split it fifty-fifty. And I said, 'Hey, sounds like a deal to me.' He was great, he gave me an office, we got on well."

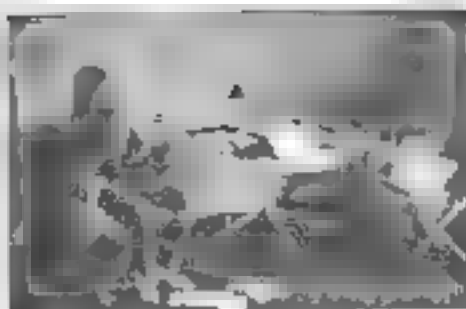
It was during this period, in the late Autumn of 1975 that Ellison met his future wife, Ellen Hammi: "Ellen and I met when I was location-scouting for a film Bob Meggison asked me to line-produce called *Pelvis* which when I worked on it, was an off-beat, low-budget comedy." *Pelvis* aka *Togo Party* was released two years later with additional sex scenes said to have been directed by horror maestro Andy Miligan, although Ellison has no recollection of him. "Bob [Meggison]

told me years later that the producer of the film, not knowing what to do with it, shot additional sex footage in a pathetic attempt to get some fast money out of the picture." When scouting locations for a café scene with the cameraman, Ellison happened into The Prince Street bar in Soho, New York: "It was a cold, grey November day, the 16th of '75 to be exact. We were waiting to order, scoping out the huge bar and century-old architecture, when a breathtakingly beautiful waitress smiled at me and asked what I wanted. After a few brief conversations, I told her what I really wanted was to take her out when she got off work. We have been together ever since. The day I met her was her second day of work at the bar and she quit on her third. She'd had a childhood wish to be a waitress, kind of romantic you know, but when that dream became a reality, it paled. She went on to work on *Saturday Night Live*, and help me with my various film projects."

In 1976 in Hollywood at the Todd-AO Studios dubbing one of the first IMAX films, *To Fly*, into Japanese and Spanish, Ellison and Ellen Hammi took the opportunity to hawk the script for a "wholesome action film" of the town around town. "We had written at the request of Alice Hsia, one of the owners of the Chinese production company that shot Bruce Lee's *The True Story*," explains Ellison. "She had requested that we write it, but she didn't pay us anything to do so. When we were done she said it would be too expensive for her company to make so we sent it to Hollywood. While we were out there we set up at the Beverly Hills Hotel, rented a Mercedes 450SL, and made the rounds like hot shots. Trying to turn no's into yes's takes time and money. We ended up staying at the Saharan Motor Hotel on Sunset. The 450SL was history. Everyone 'loved' the script but it was free love and nobody was eager to have a first time director on the project. Ellen asked me, 'What are we gonna do now?' Anyway I said, 'We're going back to New York and make a horror film.' She said, 'You're crazy.'

Crazy or not, Ellison was on the right track. A horror boom was just around the corner, and the genre was about to enter a new golden age. In 1977, while still looking for the ideal script for his own debut feature, Ellison saw a Italian film that blew him away. "There was a movie that I screened for Terry Lavenex of Aquarius one time, he asked me to look at some pictures for him when I was in Rome, to see if they were worth buying. Terry would buy something that had maybe two or three decent scenes in it, but the rest of it was junk, and then he would try to make it work. One of the films I saw was called *Ultimo mondo cannibale*, by Ruggero Deodato. You know that film? I gotta tell you, I think that's a brilliant movie! I saw it at a private screening in Rome, and it was stunning. So I called Terry that day and said, 'I think it's great.' He said, 'Yeah but they want too much money for it,' so that was the end of that. But that was an amazing piece of work, I thought."

The Europeans were gearing up for greater excesses, although the Italian market would only truly hit the motherlode with Lucio Fulci's *Zombie Flesh-Eaters* aka *Zombi* in 1979, and Deodato's follow-up to *Ultimo mondo cannibale*, the astonishing and infamous *Comanche Holocaust* (1980). America's horror renaissance was about to get under way: the success of John Carpenter's *Halloween* in 1978 set everyone's pulses racing, thrilling



teen audiences and tantalizing independent producers with its massive return for a relatively small investment. When we got back to New York, I started asking around editing rooms and barrooms, everywhere, looking for "a story, script, something that would be a different shocking film," Ellison says. "I was sure that with the success of *Carrie* and *Halloween* it was the right way to go to get 'on the boards'—and after being sweet-talked near-death in L.A., I knew I better do a project that required the least amount of dollars to make it happen."

"How did *Don't Go in the House* get made?"
Some people ask "Why?"" — Ellison

After Joe Masfield, New York producer, scriptwriter and the fanatic Ellison met him in 1978 at an edit suite where he was cutting a picture. Masfield had a script that sounded perfect — nasty, but perfect. Joe's treatment was about a disturbed man, abused as a child, who burns people to death. I said, "It sounds creepy." He said, "I'll bring it in tomorrow." The next day, he walked into my office and put on my desk a blue-laminated treatment, *The Burning Man*. I kind of got the chills. Reading it disclosed more promise than substance but it had a twisted mother-son relationship reminiscent of *Psycho*. It had a unique weapon, the flame thrower, reminiscent of *Chinatown*, *Misconduct*, and *The Thing* (Guillotine) without the blood. I never thought blood was cinematic, sorry. It had the burnt corpses. Terrifying. And what if they could come to life. And what if a child actually spend time with this madman in the house? Viewers insist on it. It wouldn't be a funhouse roller-coaster, perhaps, but it would be dark and disturbing. Ellison found his mind racing with the possibilities. "The film would be blue, like the lamination on the treatment. Blue with fiery moments. And there was 'the metal room,' a most frightening place. And the story had a heart. A desperate child is taught to torture, then grows up and does what he's been taught to do. It was very sad. Perhaps too sad but horror has always been sad to me. I'm not a big horror film fan. I'd rather be scared doing stunts in an airplane or driving too fast. Waiting for someone to murder someone else is really not my cup of tea. But, I believed that I had to make one and this seemed like the perfect nightmare. We could make it in the house or sets that doubled for the house. We wouldn't need much more. We could do it!" Joe Masfield said he would like to write the script. He would meet with us almost daily and then produce pages along the lines Ellen and I had discussed. But we were writing too slowly. Masfield was moving fast but in the wrong direction, we thought. We had a meeting with him and told him we wanted to take the script another way. He said, "You're pulling a 'Thalberg' on me," or something like that, meaning we had been working on an alternative version as we went. Apparently Irving Thalberg would hire multiple writers on the same project unbeknownst to the other writers. But Joe was okay with it all and we parted friendly. He was paid some up front and was paid in full when we'd raised enough to do so.

For Ellison, the iron was in the fire, and beginning to glow. He and Lummi pressed on with the script together, wishing we had the writing skills we possess today back then but we did the best we could with the very disturbing subject. We researched child-abuse and various psychoses.⁴ We location-scouted while we wrote. After weeks of knocking on the doors of creepy houses all over the New York, New

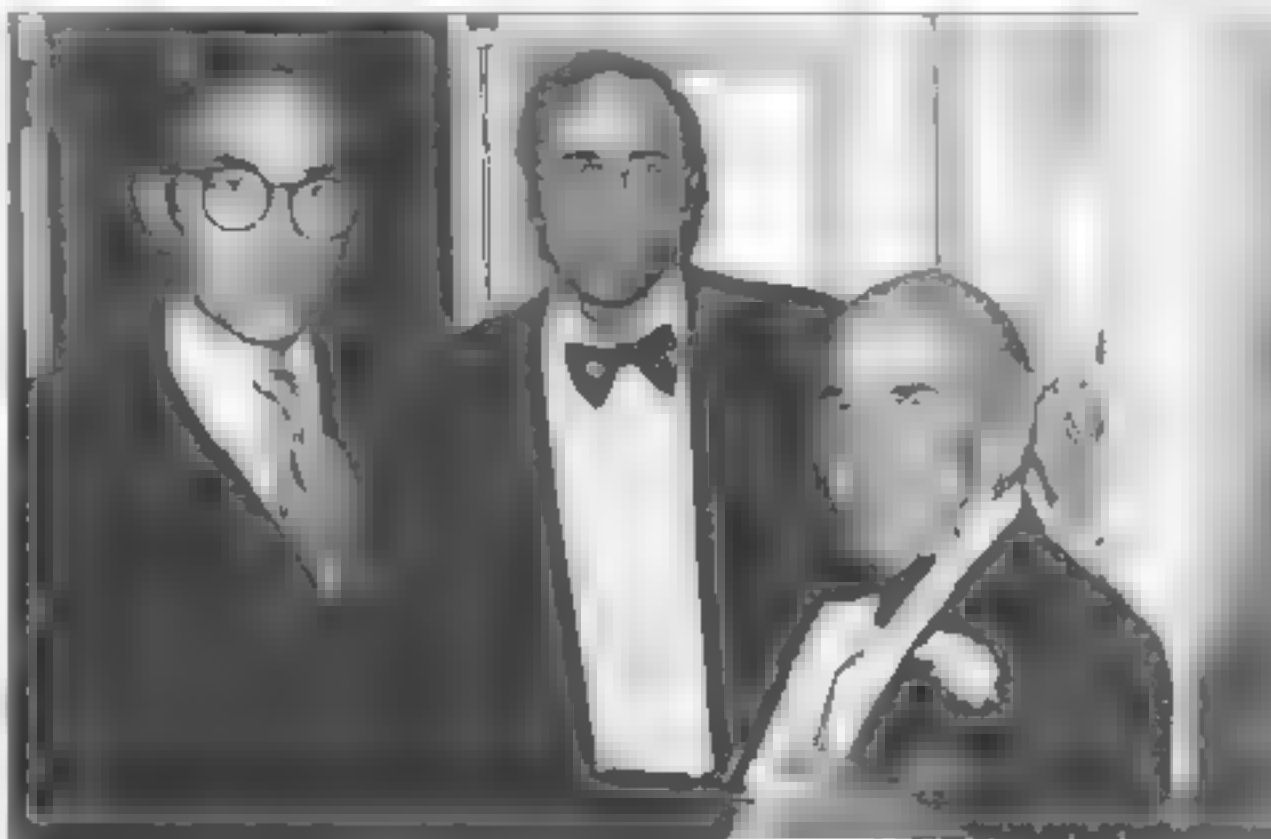
Jersey area, and discovering scary stories unfolding within, we found it. We turned a corner in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey and looked up the steep hill to the scariest house we had seen so far. Meeting the strange owners and looking through the cluttered but magnificent old place, we were spurred on to write scenes with specific rooms in mind. I was able to block the script in my mind as we wrote.

Once the screenplay was in place, a budget was assembled by associate producers Masfield, Matthew Malinson and Dennis Stephenson.⁵ "They did what they could to help us in production and we gave them a nice little," Ellison says. "Matt Malinson was Ellen's assistant for a while. I was trying to get a camera to shoot the film. I did not want to use the blimped 16mm Arriflex that was owned by the post production facility I worked in. There was also an old 35mm Arriflex that looked like it had been through the war. Then Matt came up to me and said that Ellen had left me a message. She had been to General Camera (Panavision in New York) and Dick Dizon, a great guy who had helped so many filmmakers get started, was enthralled with her. She just wanted to know if I wanted to shoot anamorphic or 185 Panavision. I felt like I had just won the Irish Sweepstakes. We had about enough money to rent that equipment for a day. Dick let us have it for eight weeks! There was a Screen Actors Guild strike on and production was pretty slow. When we ran out of money and couldn't shoot for two weeks, Dick said to Ellen, when she called to ask if we had to return the equipment, 'Just finish your movie.' He was dynamite. In addition to Dick, there were some old gentlemen at Precision Labs without whom we could not have shot the film. Mr. Durvill and Walter Prusciwicz were awesome. Lou Salvatore and Joe Dinto treated us like we were shooting a picture for Paramount. These guys knew what we were up against and wanted to help.

Matthew Malinson recalls the arrangements slightly differently. "Neither Ellen nor Joe had done very much production, whereas I had done quite a bit. So I was giving them the nuts and bolts, setting up the labs, the camera deals, the footwork to get the stuff in place. We found a way of setting up a Panavision package for [dp] Oliver Wood if we trimmed out a lot of the accessories—what kills you on a



Joe Masfield
 Center of the
 welcome the legend
 the Artistry in Cinema A
 Beverly Hills



Don't Make Me Do Anything Bad, Mother

Paravision package is the necessities. The reason people like Paravision is that you can use every known conceivable piece of technology. Lenses, filters and you can get little bit more when a whole bunch of them come up. So we cut a flat deal to use just the basic camera.

As pre-production warmed up on *The Burning Man*, Ellison was forced to leave his post with Simon Nuchtern's post-production facility. "He was a great guy but he didn't want me shooting a feature out of his place," Ellison explains. "I went off on my own in the middle of production and that was basically the end of our relationship."

Because Joe Masfield was withdrawing from the movie at this stage, Ellen Hamrell's role was suddenly expanded to include producing the film as well as writing. When Joe Masfield declined to line produce, Ellison asked me, "Who's going to produce this movie?" Ellison states, "She said, 'You are.' She said, 'You're crazy.' She did a super-human job." Matthew Matheson recalls, "Ellen Hamrell is a formidable figure as producer." "We had one kid who came down with pneumonia on the set. I said, 'We've got to get this kid back to the city,' and Ellen said, 'No we will not. If he goes back it'll be demoralizing for the crew when they see what happens when someone gets a little sick.' I said, 'Ellen, it's pneumonia!' She gave in eventually because it became such a heated argument."

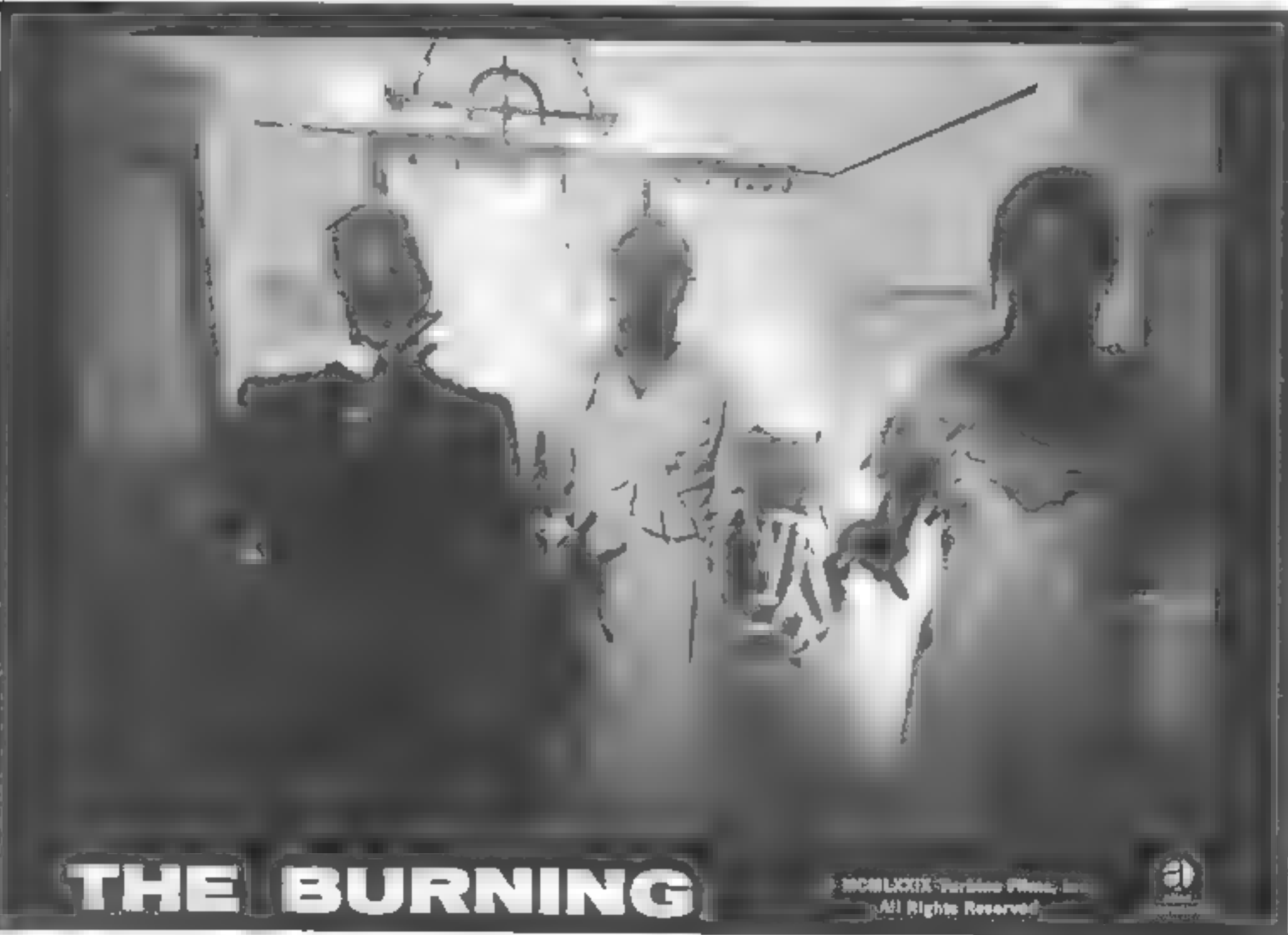
"Donald? Come here."
Shooting *Don't Go in the House*

Filming commenced in the suburban Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, and Jersey City, about fifty miles out of New York City, in the winter of 1978. The first scenes to be shot were explosions on the freezing, wintry beach near Atlantic Highlands. "They were tests really," Ellison recalls, "but we used some of them in the dream sequence. We shot in an area where there were concrete bunkers, much like the ones the Germans built in Normandy built to protect against a potential invasion during WWII. Seeing them while wearing my old surplus field jacket and having twenty-five people running around and blowing up things on my cue made my feet somewhat drunk with military power!"

The prime location, Donny Kohler's house, was used for both interior and exterior shots. There was no heat, few amenities, and I'd be chance had to duke it out against the elements and pray that no one would curl up exhausted in an upstairs room and die of hypothermia.

"That scary house was a dangerous place," Ellison stresses. "When we shot the mother's dead scenes, we had a glass of water in the night table broke for the first time at about 8pm, and when we came back later that night

time advance
of *Don't Go in*
of 1978. Ellison
of Masfield
of the same
of production credit
of Ellison's
of a change



THE BURNING

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he water was frozen. We had a sub-zero set without the expense that William Friedkin went to on *The Exorcist*. When you see breath coming out of Donny's mouth at the end? Yes, it was *that* cold. Same in the Jersey City Incinerator where we shot the fire scenes.

Cinematographer Oliver Wood, a Brit who started out as an assistant cameraman for BBC, West in Bristol, moved to the USA in the 1960s. He lists Gianni Di Venanzo (who worked with Fellini) and Raoul Coutard (Godard's regular DP) as his primary influences. In 1970 he shot the astonishing black-and-white true-life crime story *The Honeyman Killers*. "I was brought in by Martin Scorsese who left after a week because of creative differences with the producer," he recalls. "Leonard Castle, who wrote the script, took over the direction of the movie." As for *Don't Go in the House*, he remembers discussing with Ellison that, "When the killer put on the mask we decided that we did not want to see his face. And we made a sort of doll's house out of the dead bodies. Jo and I had very similar views on how the movie should be shot, and he liked the way I lit it. Although every now and then he wanted it to be darker which was easy because we had no money to make it brighter."

The first shot at the main location was in the foyer of Donny's house, when he answers the phone call from Ben," says Ellison. "I remember the light broke through the clouds in the middle of a take and biased through the beveled glass windows. Oliver and I got an excited chuckle out of our good fortune. It was a memorable moment, just to be under way."

Ellison was very pleased with the performance of his lead actor Dan Grimaldi. The two first met when they were studying acting together and they remained friends, with Ellison occasionally hiring Grimaldi to do voice work on the movies he was dubbing. He was not the obvious first choice for Donny Kohler," Ellison reflects.

Ellison first envisioned him blond and frail, with a thoroughbred nervous twitch. But Danny brought a provincial, childish naiveté to the character. He was eager to get into the role even though it was quite a stretch. With the Strasberg technique we both had in common and with the willingness we both had to play this thing out, we worked very well together. He gave a brave and convincing performance. Perhaps too convincing. Audiences seemed stunned and upset that this horror trip was somehow real." It's certainly true that audiences tend to be rattled and disturbed by the film more than excited in the lighter way. "Joe realised that what is lacking in most horror pictures is a focus on performance," says Matthew Malinson, and it's true, we spend an awful lot of screen time with Donny Kohler. His childlike quaver and his torment, get under your skin.

If audiences were disturbed by Grimaldi, they were shocked almost out of their skins by the film's most rugged set-piece. Ellison recalls: "Oliver took sick the day we shot the fiery death scene. I was running camera which was locked down. The effect was set up on two tracks positioned ninety degrees from each other and the image came together in the lens. I was terrified that we were actually killing someone because it looked so real. I had to take my eye away from the eyepiece to be sure it was all right. The illusion was totally believable even to me. It upset me and I wondered, 'What in the hell am I making here?' What would Fritz Lang have done? I was



trying to make my *Dr. Caligari* complete with off-angles, bizarre angular sets (although Donny's bedroom was not a set but an actual room in the house).

Matthew Malinson remembers the night of the burning. "It started shooting around ten or eleven p.m. and went on until the early hours, maybe four a.m. We were having a lot of trouble getting the prism to line up the real body and the burning body. It was done in a space we had, a mini-sound stage. It was an in-camera effect, basically you saw what the end result was through the camera on set. We had a split prism, we were filming two hanging bodies simultaneously: one was a hanging dummy that we would burn, the other one was the victim. The split prism was then angled so they are superimposed in the camera and it looks like she's burning. The actress would wriggle around, of course, and so we would have to wriggle the burning body in the same fashion to follow her."

The brave actress whose naked writhing is the focus of the scene was Debra Richmond (listed as Johanna Brishav on the credits). "Debra modeled nude and studied art at Hunter College, where Ellen, who was there to paint her," Ellison recalls. "She and Debra became fast friends. Debra was a Playboy Bunny when I met her. She used to crack me and Ellen up talking about 'the Bunny Mother.' Ellen asked her if she would do the role and told her what it would demand. An actress we had booked for the part backed out when her boyfriend insisted that she quit. Fortunately, Richmond loved to make her clothes off on camera, and Ellison agrees with me that she gives a sterling performance. "As you say, she was a trouper. She didn't need any coaxing, but Ellen stayed with her throughout her scenes, just off camera. During the fire scene, which Peter Kunz had designed so simply and brilliantly, I was actually more upset than Debra was. As I mentioned earlier, she was nowhere near the fire but in the lens it sure looked like she was burning up. No one else on the set could see what I was looking at. The unblimped Arriflex 35 had the potential to leak light onto the frame if the operator took his eye off the eyepiece. But that's what I did, because I *could* believe my eyes. Then I'd look at her stage and she was fine, except for screaming and pretending to be burning. It was a surreal moment I assure you. I also must say that I was quite uncomfortable after shooting that

Director of photography
here towards

1970s

Proud father





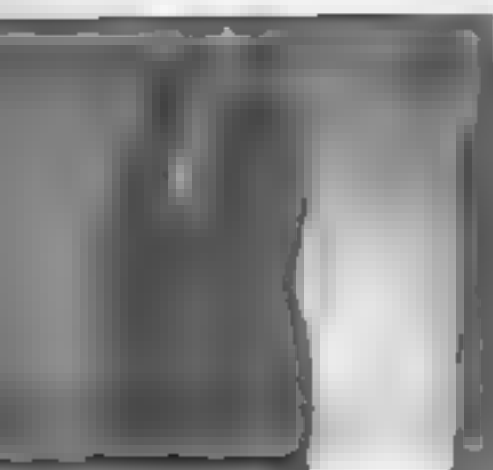
... effective

scene. It was just too disturbing. I kept telling myself that the audience wants to see this. And the story would not be complete without it. In those days, everything *everything* was being shown in film. If you tried to be 'tasteful' with a cutaway, especially in a low-budget film, you wouldn't get your picture out.

Ellison devised such a fiendish highlight of cinematic horror: the question then arose of how to realise the aftermath, with its wizened, blackened corpses. "To get the burnt corpse look was a question itself," says Ellison.

I had found a black and white photo of a GI hanging out of a tank on Guadalcanal. He was burnt charred black. I showed this picture to every make-up artist I interviewed. People would try all kinds of techniques to reproduce that look. One guy came in with tissue paper and some black liquid stuff and crumpled and moulded a burnt corpse cheek on the spot. But it was Tom Brunberger who was able to plan the whole thing: moulding the full suits, doing the detail touch-ups. I used ballet dancers for the corpses because I wanted them to move in a rather stylized way. Plus I knew they wouldn't quit. Dancers are great to work with, talk about troupers. Those girls shot make after take in the freezing cold *on the beach* in February for the dream sequence. I remember them shivering, but never complaining." Oliver Wood confirms the conditions were extreme. "For the beach scenes it was so cold that the batteries kept freezing and we could never get long enough takes.

... of Don't



Tom Brunberger told *Fangoria's* Bob Martin, "I suggested to them that we not try to attach prosthetics to the actresses, because the prosthetics could only make them look larger - and when you're burned you *shrink*, as you lose fluid. The director wanted the victims absolutely charred black, and skeletal, so I suggested that he use dancers who would be much slimmer than the actresses, but the same height. So that's what we did. I saw it a couple of times with audiences, and it worked. They assumed these were merely lifeless manikins - and at the end, when they came to life, the audiences *freaked*."

Something has may come as a surprise to the film's fans (it certainly surprised me) is that the film was entirely

dubbed, with nothing more than a guide track recorded on set. As a fan of Italian cinema I've grown used to dubbing, which in the case of the Italians was often done in a rather splashy, hurried fashion. Perhaps due to a combination of Ellison's experience in dubbing other people's pictures, and the fact that he had his own cast re-recording their lines in the correct language (a rare occurrence in Italian productions), the results are pretty well indistinguishable from the real thing. There was camera noise right through the lens of those old Pan-Arris Panavision lenses fitted onto unblimped 35mm Arriflex cameras," Ellison explains.

"They took a great picture but sounded like a coffee grinder. Much of the film was post-synched later something which, as you know, I was quite familiar with. I guess that gives the film another Italian touch. I much prefer direct sound but when you're faced with options like 6mm blimped vs. 35mm Pan-Arr there is no contest.

As filming progressed, the make-over scene "The clothing store scene was a Joe Massfield idea. I remember when I read 'The Matador.' I thought, 'Wow, what the hell is that?' But Ellison and I re-wrote the dialogue. David McComh, the actor in the scene, really got it, but the irony had been laid out for in advance. We were doing a cliché make-over scene - on a psychopath!" The levity increased as the crew moved to a discotheque to shoot Robert Oust as Ben, taking Downy out on the town. Ellison laughs. "I thought Bob was great. Some of the lines were written for a New York Italian *paisan*. But when Bob said those lines in his audition, we laughed like crazy and I realised he brought a whole different thing to the part. It was better than any I can him on the spot. The disco scene was shot in a club in New Rochelle, New York. We searched for months before we found a place that would let us set someone's hair (a special wig) on fire. That was another extremely long day. That night, before he succumbed to exhaustion Oliver said to me, 'It's getting very near the end.' We just barely finished the scheduled work, doing the fight scene in the parking lot with the sun threatening to come up. Ellison and I still quote him, sounding like a burnt out Pepper!"

"May I PLEASE use the phone?"

Post-Production and Marketing

And so, with the chills and thrills of the shoot at an end, February 1979 saw *The Burning*, as it was then known, whisked off to the post-production suite. Matthew Mullinson recalls, "Since it was low-budget we worked out of a place called 'Fantasmagoria' owned by this guy Kent Robinson. It was like, 'Give me a few bucks and you can work in my place when I'm not using it.' At the time, Kent was doing a lot of work for *Saturday Night Live*, the film segments, and so that was his bread and butter.

Ellison prepared a rough cut, and screened it for Aquarius Releasing's head honcho, Terry Levene. For Ellison this was the crunch time. He respected Levene's opinion on marketing and knew that he was guaranteed a fair shake. "Terry was a tough guy. When I met him he was in the business of buying very inexpensive pictures from Italy, Japan, wherever he could buy them from. He paid cash for them - people loved that, even if it was very little they could count on *getting* that very little. He'd buy these Italian pictures that were great in the first half - and then the hero, after helping the kid and saving the girl would... he shoot the cop or shoot the kid, and all of a sudden blow

in as his heroic standing and we'd be just, 'Whoa! Maybe
 we'd be some really amazing stunts, but no story. You'd
 be the first half-hour and think 'Wow, this is great, and
 then they'd take this stupid turn and the whole movie
 would go down the drain. So we'd be charged with re-
 editing, removing it, dubbing it with a reworked script,
 new titles etc. It was great because I learned a lot
 working on these things. But the point is, I valued
 his advice about how to get a low-budget picture out.
 I took him to a screening with some other people there
 and it was mid-day, and of course the sound is rough
 and it's a work cut, scratch music thrown in, and about
 halfway through the picture, Terry's snoring! I was
 shocked. There were others there, young filmmaker
 types, and I felt like the loneliest man in the world! It was
 terrible, and I remember saying to [editor, Jane Karson]
 at the time, 'Sharpen up your scissors, Jane. And she said
 'My scissors are sharp! My scissors are sharp!' I thought,
 'Don't do this. This may be a work of art but no
 one's going to see it.' So I had to become an enemy of the
 concept, try to compromise with what the audience
 would accept. And that's where I made some mistakes, but I also
 made some viewable, and I was able to make a deal. The
 running time was probably 98-102 minutes. It's 8
 minutes. And the difference between the two cuts? "I
 can't say the longer version showed a positive side to
 Kohler exactly, but it may have shown more of the
 human side, a more innocent side."

With Levene's unenthusiastic response to guard him on
 the set, I pushed hard into the wind to recut the film. Post
 went on and on, and the money ran out twice.
 Karson's experience as an editor proved invaluable: she
 had just come from editing *Pumping Iron*, the documentary
 filmed to launch Arnold Schwarzenegger in the USA.
 In his haste to rescue the film, Ellison allowed Karson
 to cut what, on reflection, he wishes he'd kept in. "I
 was wrestling with her, she was being a good
 girl, saying 'This isn't working, it's too long' but
 the problem was that she was really trying to trim it down
 without boring anybody or make a bad cut, instead
 going to smash it together so that it would be shocking
 scene where Donny kisses one of the corpses
 and much more interaction between him and the girls in the
 cemetery. Kwei, who worked on the picture beginning
 and who became a successful editor, said, every
 time I saw him for years, 'I would have left the kiss in. I
 left that scene and she took it out because it didn't cut
 but it could have cut as part of a montage or something
 maybe with an optical or two. Jane fought hard to keep it
 and eventually I relented. I shouldn't have. And Donny
 went back to the voices in his head a lot more, reading
 to the corpses and seeing them seemingly react. It
 was much more developed."

Does the footage still exist? Ellison has both good
 and bad news for devotees of the film: "Actually it does.
 We did a TV version – which I don't believe was ever
 on TV! – and Viacom bought the rights for six
 years, I think, from Ed Montoro. When we recut the
 film, that corpse-kissing scene was added because we
 needed more time – we'd had to cut so much of the
 extra stuff that we needed to put stuff back in. I have a
 35mm print of the picture, but I've lost my 16mm copy of
 the Viacom version, and that would have been interesting
 because it has other material that we didn't use in the
 final cut."

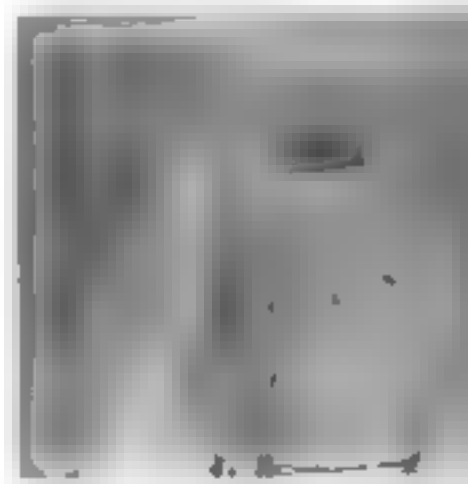


Richard Einhorn, whose marvelous score adds muscle
 to the film's tension and release, was a busy man at the
 time, scoring *Shock Waves* and *Eyes of a Stranger* for Ken
 Wiederhorn, and *The Prowler* for Joseph Zito. "He did
 some brilliant work for us," Ellison agrees. "He and I
 worked very well together. The disco tracks and the other
 source music I produced. When Richard played a cue for
 me, I would push him for more, and in the end he delivered
 sounds that I hear copied to this day." Apparently, there are
 no plans for a soundtrack album, which is a pity: Donny's
 disco infatuation and Einhorn's eerie electro-xylophone
 motif, plus his more abstract swampy electronics, would
 make a highly desirable collection.

At last, with a finished cut of the movie completed, it
 was time to seek distribution. And for once in this book the
 story does not take a sudden nosedive into the depths of
 despair. Ellison describes the marketing process: "My
 friend and colleague, Dieter Menz of Atlas International
 (of whom I had dubbed many foreign films – German,
 Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, etc.) – asked me to let
 him represent *House* at MIPED in Milano. I had shown the
 film to Paramount who said, 'Let us know what other
 people think.' (Really.) We had not made a deal instantly as
 I had expected. We had no money left. I trusted Dieter
 more than almost anyone in the film business, so I said
 okay. My friend Varoujan 'Peter' Aghbolagi accompanied
 me and Ellen to Milano to market the movie. He loved the
 idea of coming and he paid for the trip. (He was paid back
 when we sold the film.) I'm sad to say Peter died a couple
 of years ago. Arriving in grey Milano in October of '79,
 Dieter informs us that he has set up only one screening, for
 Thursday. We had to wait most of the week to see if we
 were to make any real progress. Dieter showed us an offer
 for Argentina by Tuesday, and we had a few other offers
 for places like Sri Lanka, but we had to wait for our big
 screening to see what we could expect. Everyone had
 warned me, 'Don't be surprised when they walk in and
 walk out of your screening. The buyers there have to see a
 lot of films and they have to keep moving.' Thursday came.
 Ellen, Peter and I sat in the screening room. A few people
 wandered in. Then a few more. By the time the film

James Jimmy Kwei edited *Donny Kwei's House* and went on
 to collaborate with Martin Scorsese as
 assistant editor to Scorsese's regular
 collaborator, Thelma Schoonmaker on *Alter Egos*, *The*
Color of Money, *Goodfellas*, *Casino*,
Bringing Out the Dead and *Gangs of New*
York. He also assisted Francis Ford Coppola in
 editing his brilliant psychedelic monster movie
Brain Damage.

Donny models the only outfit he feels truly



started, the screening room was full. Soon after, the three of us had to leave to make room for more. Dieter was outside, shoving people in and forcing the door closed behind them like a Japanese subway conductor! The room was packed. Only two people left the screening, buyers from Sweden. It was explained to me that they did not allow nudity and violence in the same film in Sweden. When the film ended, the doors flew open and Dieter, Ellen and I were attacked by hopeful buyers! I saw some people I knew from Italy, some from Asia, and I was chatting with an Italian distributor when Dieter grabbed me forcefully by the arm and said, "Come meet Mr. Montoro." He then escorted me toward Ed Montoro, President of Film Ventures. Dieter was helping to secure a US distribution deal while he himself was only asking for rights outside of the US. See what I mean about Dieter? He of course would come from a good US deal: better publicity, a good US track record, which of course would help him sell worldwide. But he never asked for anything from the US deal he helped to make happen. Meanwhile, Bob Shaye (New Line Cinema, whom I had worked for dubbing Sonny Chiba movies and others) made a bid for the picture. So did WCO Embassy. But by making a deal with FVI and keeping worldwide rights exclusive of the US for Dieter, we were able to pay our investors.

Don't Go in the House opened wide near Seattle, New York and Los Angeles, and was promoted on TV with ads running in prime-time during *Saturday Night Live*. It also played drive-ins, with John Bud Cardos's *The Dark* and did fair theatrical business in the UK (where it was savagely cut for an 'X' certificate). Most importantly in Britain, the film performed excellently on video rental, with the uncut version unleashed by Videospace in the days before video certification.

"You scarred my sister for life!" Audience Reaction

Don't Go in the House is not a film that warms the heart of your average horror hound. Which is ironic, given the way horror fans virtually beg the genre to assault their sensibilities. Horror films *should* shock, they should leave you writhing out, troubled, shaken. Your mind should be plagued with images that linger for days. It's a lesser brand of horror that merely tickles the belly of your fears. For me *Don't Go in the House* easily transcends its low-budget limitations, and the occasional flaws count for nothing next to its ferocious violence and seeping morbidity. There are popular films in which men kill tens, hundreds, even thousands of people, with the sort of gung-ho mindlessness that makes Donny Kohler seem like struggling Saint. *Don't Go in the House* makes sure you feel the fear and horror. Donny is stuck inside his sickness and the film portrays him as a lost soul, a feeble creature driven by forces he can never overcome. His 'wickedness' is truly horrific, but he's pathetic, victimized. No one is going to get their aggressive jollies by identifying with Donny Kohler.

Elson took the trouble to discuss his script with psychologists before shooting began: "We described the patterns of behaviour in the script, and they said yes, as a matter of fact it's classic. The conversations were not too in-depth because it was so obvious that the material was a classic case. It was perhaps a little obvious that he would use fire, I mean that wasn't necessarily part of the psycho-

logical make-up, but we knew that child abuse could bring out psychosis. We tried to keep a logic to it so it wasn't just gratuitous. I remember one review that said there's an attempt to make this seem like a socially redeeming picture but it's just exploitation film and it's pretentious that the filmmakers were trying to do this. A lot of people said to get ready toaters."

During the horror boom of the early 1980s, it was common for mainstream reviewers to review the audience as well as the movie. In their efforts to "prove" that the new wave of explicit horror was a bad influence on society, someone cheered or laughed during a murder scene, it was reported with the relish of a born k. Joy, and used to demonstrate that horror pandered to the worst in human nature (exaggerously implying that the film would therefore stimulate real-life violence in its audience). Even a clever writer like Pauline Kael routinely propped up her subjective opinions by conducting a specious survey of audience reaction. But according to Elson, no one was ever likely to make such a case against *Don't Go in the House*: "We'd play in the same multiplexes where they were showing *Friday the 13th*, for instance, and I'd go in to the other theatre playing that film and you'd hear screams and giggles and see kids hugging and getting all excited and having fun being grossed out by all the blood. But then you'd go in to *Don't Go in the House*, you know, and here'd be like dead fucking silence" [laughs]. "Nobody was hugging anybody." They were just agape, you know, like "Oh my God what is this?" I thought, gee I've failed."

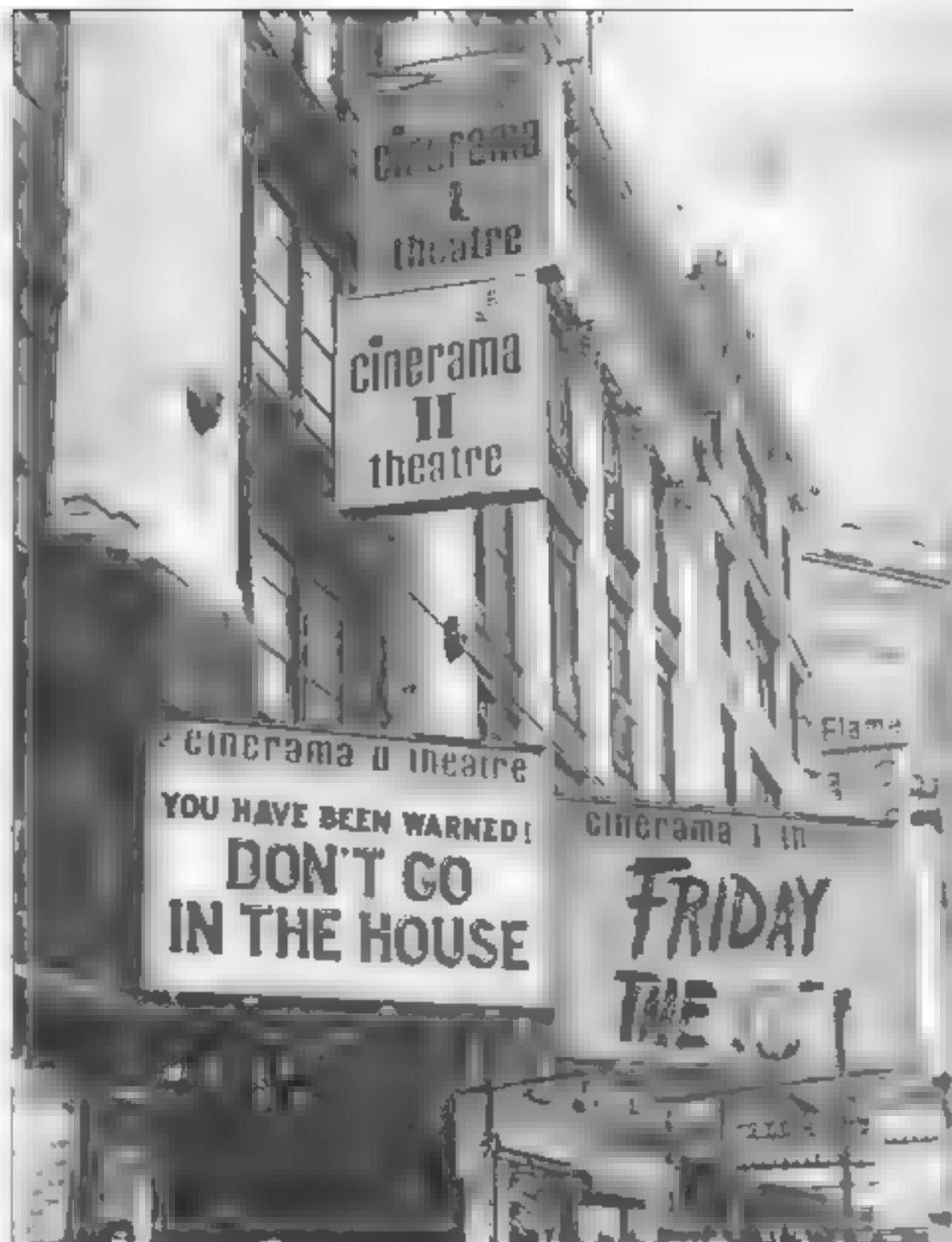
"You didn't fail," I interject, "You just made the archetypal bad date film."

Exactly! The perfect description!" Elson adds. "What I was trying to do was get this 'being at home with the monster' thing, you know? I wanted to be at home with this fellow. What does he do in the afternoon? I was curious. What does a madman do when he's not killing? I didn't mean it to be a misogynist statement, but I can understand why people took that from it. I felt I was making something different to all the other films of this type. To say that sounds egocentric because I was not a film master. It was my first feature, but that was my attempt to do what I thought the material called for. I knew there were exploitative aspects from the start, mind you. That scene in the metal room was key to getting the film released. And yet there are no other scenes quite like it in the film, no other scenes quite like it, period! I did some work at NYU, but I did not actually shoot another film of my own until *Don't Go in the House*. That's my student film! And when people criticise it I look at things like *Who's That Knocking at My Door* by Scorsese or that first Coppola picture *Dementia 13*, and think, well, kicking off with *Don't Go in the House* isn't so bad."

"Can I play my music loud?" Joey and After

After *House*, Elson was, if you like, burned out with the horror genre. Even when Ed Montoro offered him the opportunity to make another horror film straight away, to be shot in Los Angeles and with the money already lined up, he said no. As a devotee of *Don't Go in the House*, I resist the temptation to scream at him and, as calmly as possible, ask why. "Sometimes even Ellen doesn't get this," he laughs, "The idea of making a slasher film purely for marketing was something I couldn't do. I could only

imagine Ed calling me on location to say that he had seen the daisies and "We need more blood, Babe!" But the fact that I was so turned off horror created an opportunity: a horror film send-up. Ellen and I came up with *Scary Movie*. And yes, it was exactly the concept which has recently been so successful. Take the most popular horror films of the past few years, and exaggerate them. Pay the screams off with laughs. We wrote a very funny script which some producers wanted to buy/steal and probably kick us out of the picture. But just as we were sending the script all over Hollywood to agents, producers, anyone who would read it, Frank Lanzino (Frankie Lanz) a friend who had invested in *House*, made me an offer. Frankie was a Wall Street guy who produced and hosted the Royal New York Doo-Wop Show. He was a natural talent, who had been a DJ in his former life. Loved the music and produced one hell of an oldies show, first at the Beacon Theatre in New York and later at Radio City Music Hall. Frankie wanted to make a film about his show. I had seen far too many documentaries on Golden Oldies. No one cared. In fact, Radio City people told me that the show sold out for two or possibly three times a week but if they ran more than three shows, the place would be empty. "It's always the same people that come to the show every year," is what they told me. It seemed essential that a feature film should involve the younger generation in the story. Oldies and new music. A father/son story. I went to work on *Joey*. When Warners screened the picture, they said, "It's really wholesome, yeah, kiss of death." But 21st Century offered double the negative cost of the movie and Frankie, in good faith, took the deal. They were a public company and they went broke by the fourth payment. It was extremely difficult to replace the distribution deal. Everybody wanted to make sure 21st Century no longer had rights to the film. It went on and on. Finally another company opened the picture in limited theatrical release designed to live up to the bare minimum of their contract. It got good reviews but with no advertising, this 'wholesome' film with great music, old and new, was pulled by the distributor who didn't want to invest a dime to make it properly exposed. They spent almost nothing on advertising. They just made a great deal for themselves selling it to HBO and then other ancillary markets. We used a guy to clear the music and several of the recent rock producers reneged on their deal. They claimed *Joey's* music rights were limited and were expiring. It was a nightmare. That's why copies of *Joey* are so rare. We had the Silhouettes ('Get a Job'), The Elegants ('Little Star'), Screamin' Jay Hawkins ('I Put a Spell on You'), The Manhattaners ('Boy from New York City'), Vito and the Salutations ('Unchained Melody'), The Teenagers ('Why Do Fools Fall in Love?'). The oldies groups were great and we never had a problem with them. We created an oldies group, The Delsonics, who seemed like an original group but were fictitious. Their oldies song was new but sounded like an old hit, 'Moonlight Love'. With the insurmountable problems releasing *Joey*, I realised that I could no longer go to an investor and say, as I had said with *House*, 'Let me have some money to make my film, and if I'm alive when it's done, you will get your money back.' There were too many dishonest people in the picture business. The deals were at the indie producer's disadvantage. Lying with the FVI deal was bad enough. At least I was able to force some payments out of Ed and between that and Atlas I got my investors' money to them. But this *Joey* thing was impossible. You end up with no control and therefore no



ability to do what you would want to do. You can't make promises because you won't be able to keep them.

Ellison reflects on his latter-day film experiences. "My best scripts, which I wrote on spec, were never produced. I worked in Hollywood doing scripts for TV. I was hired to write a script for Carol Burnett, and I started doing post production again, as Ellen went to law school and had two daughters with me. (I've asked them not to watch *House* but if they ever did to please find it within their hearts to forgive me), I also had some work stolen from me. While I acknowledge that similar ideas and 'high concepts' can be generated by different people in different places, I am sure that *The Thirteenth Floor*³ was stolen from me at least twice. I exposed it to many people, some of them the wrong people, and I've seen pathetic versions of it, not just using the title.

In the 1990s, tired of the film business, Ellison returned to his music, and by reinvesting in his first passion made a new life for himself. In the end, while taking better and better meetings, writing better scripts, and being

Horror icons were shown in the summer of 1980 with the new Cinerama located on Broadway at 13th and Ellison was playing the same theatre and documenting the era. Cinerama 2 was located on Broadway at 13th and 14th, a dollar-fifty more than the others. The pricing policy that kept Cinerama 2 from being a success was the fact that it was a double-screen theatre. Cinerama 2 was located on the balcony of the old one-screen theatre, which boasted plush red seats. The Roman Coliseum theme was known to well during the 1980s. Ellison played many of the kung-fu action movies he worked on for Simon Nuchtern's August 1980

The big scene sure was stressed parts

Even if Ellison does return to the cinema, it's unlikely that he'll do so in the extreme mode of *Don't Go in the House*. The film is a glorious, shocking experience – utterly of its time, and never to be repeated. For star Dan Grimaldi, *House* is the highlight of his career so far – an essential count in a recurring role in the smash TV show *The Sopranos* as ‘Patsy’ Parisi. It’s about time, though, that *Don't Go in the House* was re-assessed; for providing the horror genre with one of its most shocking set-pieces, on a par with the best work of Lucio Fulci, Dario Argento and Tobe Hooper, and for its accomplished mix of humour, horror and melancholia. Let's light a candle for the burning man.

- 1 An heroic Alaskan husky dog immortalized as a statue in Central Park, New York City.
- 2 Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney – civil rights workers murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi in 1964 – the case forms the basis of the film *Mississippi Burning*.
- 3 A top-line American business specialising in construction and mining machinery.
- 4 My own research led me to the case of Joseph Kallinger apprehended in 1975 on several home invasion, sexual molestation and ultimately in murder. Kallinger's is a true case: he murdered one of his sons – a girl, or teenager, took the other, aged just twelve, out with him as an accomplice in attacks on women. Whilst it's overly simplistic to lay the blame on child behaviour at the feet of their parents, Kallinger's childhood was horrendous. Adopted by extremely sadistic Catholic parents, he suffered gross mistreatment and humiliation. When he was admitted to hospital for a hernia operation at the age of six, his mother told him the surgery was to stop his penis growing. Like Mrs. K in *Don't Go in the House*, Kallinger's mother exerted her discipline making the boy hold his hand over an open flame, beating him, cried. And like Dennis Kohler, Kallinger grew up to take pleasure torturing others. Kallinger was also an arsonist in his youth. He wrote poetry on the subject, an example of which is striking in this case:
*Oh, what ecstasy setting fires brings to my mind
 What power I feel at the thought of fire
 Oh, what pleasure what heavenly pleasure!*
- 5 When I asked Matthew Mattinson who Dennis Stephenson he laughed. “Ah, I know is Stephenson. He gave her a thousand dollars.”
- 6 Ruth Dardick, who played Denny Kohler's mother, in *Space Lee's* mother in a film by Matthew Mattinson called *A Fear Touch of Death* (1980).
- 7 In *Fangoria* (1984).
- 8 A script Ellison copyrighted in 1986.

JOSEPH ELLISON: FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

- 1978 *Unsettled* (Green Arrow 1978/1980)
- 1981 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 1981/1980)
- 1982 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 1982/1980)
- 1983 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 1983/1980)
- 1984 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 1984/1980)
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- 2018 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 2018/1980)
- 2019 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 2019/1980)
- 2020 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 2020/1980)
- 2021 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 2021/1980)
- 2022 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 2022/1980)
- 2023 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 2023/1980)
- 2024 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 2024/1980)
- 2025 *Don't Go in the House* (Green Arrow 2025/1980)

If You Go Down in the Caves Today...

Mark Sawicki & Chris Huntley on the making of *The Strangeness*

The Strangeness (1980)

The Gold Spike mine has a bad reputation. It was abandoned several times and its final closure in the 1890s, and rumours abound of a ravening creature lurking in its depths, said to have killed scores of miners. Now, an exploration party comprising Hemmings, a mining engineer (Rolf Theison); two mining consultants, Carver (Dan Lanham), and Ruggles (Chris Huntley); Angela Platt, a geologist (Diane Borczykowski), and writer Dan Flanders and his wife Cindy (Mark Sawicki and Fern Berland), have hired Morgan (Keith Hurt), a British-born miner with knowledge of the tunnels, to help them assess its suitability for re-opening. Flanders is researching a book about the place, and both he and Morgan regale the rest of the party with stories of the Gold Spike's violent past. As the party travel further and further into the maze of tunnels, the stories seem less and less fanciful.

The Strangeness is a real team effort, made on a very low budget by a dedicated band of friends, and its abundant charm is a credit to their ingenuity. Concerning a Lovecraftian menace lurking in an abandoned mine, it rewards the viewer's persistence with an ominous atmosphere, flashes of humour, and a particularly startling monster rucked away in the film's final reel. Among the difficulties encountered on the way are a few too many dialogue scenes, over-ambitious low-level lighting that slips off the scale into eye-strain territory, and some lapses of logic and continuity, meaning that it's easy to lose track of what's going on. It's a film that's never going to win over sceptics, but if you're a monster movie fan or a cine-spelunker accustomed to roving around in the further-flung caves of the genre it's definitely worth your while.

"For a mine it sure looks like a cave," says Cindy, as the group descend into the dark. Well, for a set it sure looks like a location! Explanations of how the film was created follow in the interview with Sawicki and Huntley, but suffice to say the sets are superbly realised – certainly enough to fool this viewer, who believed the film was shot in real mine workings throughout. Once we're underground the illusion is watertight, compensating well for the shortcomings of the script.





Strangeness: the way things

First to die is geologist Angela, and we can deduce that she's the least popular member of the party from the rather casual way the others move on after she's trapped presumed dead, in a rock fall. The film needed a death at this point, for sure, but the lack of an emotional aftermath makes the group seem rather callous. Perhaps realistic shock and hysteria would have been difficult to sustain at such an early stage (after all, it would surely propel everyone to the surface again), but it's something that should probably have been addressed in the script. Structural errors like this show the writers (director Hilman and actor/split man Huntley) getting to grips with their craft, and while there are decently written character scenes throughout, the fact that they take place aside from the storyline suggests that narrative structure was not the team's strong suit.

The screenplay makes up for its callowness in other ways. As if to pre-empt criticisms of hokiness, Sawicki playing would-be writer Dan Flanders – provides a running commentary, breathlessly exaggerating everything as the party enter and explore the mine. It's as if the film is taking the monkey out of its own clichés: you can imagine Flanders's words, spoken perhaps by John Carradine, gracing a lurid, hyperbolic movie trailer. It's a risky approach that could have lessened the atmosphere and kept the viewer at arm's length, but the filmmakers get away with it by depicting Flanders as a bit of a dweeb (and like Woody Allen at times). In one of the best dialogue scenes, he "interviews" sardonic old Morgan, supposedly seeking material for his book. The older man spins him tall tales and elaborate jokes – but the humourless Flanders fails to notice his leg is being pulled. When the penny finally drops, he acts as if Morgan has been wasting his time, instead of recognising the man's teasing as exactly the kind of "colourful" character material a writer could use.

Fans of the film must surely be holding their breath for a DVD transfer from the original negative, because if ever a film needed the strong blacks and heightened clarity of the digital medium, this is it. What is at least clear from the video release (and the marginally better though extremely rare, budget DVD from 23rd Century) is that the film stands or falls by its lighting – a precarious position considering the unforgiving nature of early 1980s video transfers. O'Brien and Greenfield's cinematography wrings variety from a succession of rock walls and cramped tunnels by employing coloured gels and eerie lighting effects on the actor's faces, but when the image dwindles down to a couple of weak torch-beams the production hits the limits of audience tolerance.



The Strangeness: this one from the



The Strangeness has no need of excuses for its fabulous stop-motion monster: a demented tentacled phallus with a gaping, undulating urethral opening. Such a provocative combination of phallic and vaginal imagery is spot-on when it is considered that the story is set in a most unlikely place, suggesting fear of the womb, castration and all the Freudian/Kristevan baggage that accompanies such notions. (You'll forgive me if I don't get out my pickaxe and shovel here: I'm so over psycho-analytical theory.) In the interview accompanying this review, monster designer Chris Huntley admits that he worked on this Freudian nightmare without considering its symbolic aspects, but it's thanks to his naivety that the film can boast a genuine creature from the Id: it's a guaranteed "Wow!" for monster fans and well worth the wait for the moment when it finally appears. Huntley's monster looks like a country cousin of H.R. Giger's creations for *Alien*, and for fans of the BBC's long-running horror/sci-fi show *Doctor Who* it also brings to mind the similarly obscene Fendahleen in the creepy 1977 tale *Image of the Fendahl*. In fact it's such a treat that it's a pity the filmmakers didn't give it more of an airing earlier in the story.

The Strangeness is a light-weight entertainment and there's no point trying to say otherwise, but it's exactly the sort of film that makes rooting around at film fun: such fun; for all its flaws it's been made with guts and spirit and determination. From its wonderful title (which was my initial reason for buying the video) to its eye-opening, gender-busting monster finale: this precursor to such recent hits as *The Descent* and *The Cave* may not win any prizes, but it's well worth a look if you love the shadowy recesses of the genre.

Mark Sawicki & Chris Huntley Interviewed

Introducing Mark Sawicki

Mark Sawicki, personable star, co-producer and effects designer of *The Strangeness*, was born in Jackson on 10 September 1956. "My father was a dancer during the Depression, but by the time I was born along he and my mother owned a neighbourhood grocery store," he explains. "We lived above the store. When the supermarket chains wiped out small groceries they moved to a big store and insurance stores. They were about my age now when they did this and I'm particularly impressed by them, since now I'm facing the demise of traditional craftsmanship with the digital era."

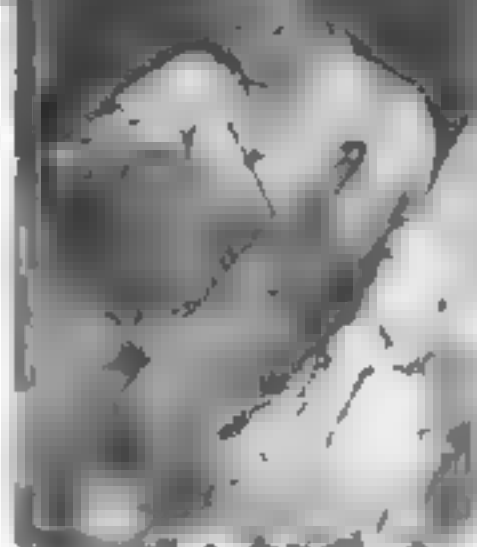
As a monster-movie fanatic Doug McKewen (see *Interview* in *The Deadly Spawn*), Sawicki caught the stop-motion bug early. "I started playing and sculpting with clay when I was five. My first memories of cinema came from drive-in movies that my older brother Tom would take me to. He would sit in front with his date and I would sit on books in the back, as chaperone, and watch Godzilla or Vincent Price light up the screen. Two of my favourite films were Roger Corman's *The Raven* and Ray Harryhausen's *Mysterious Island*. I became a Harryhausen fan and a stop-motion fanatic. When I was about twelve years old I discovered my parents' seldom-used Super-8 home movie camera and discovered that I could animate my clay characters with it. From then on through high school and early college I would make short animated clay films. I was also exposed to acting. I appeared in numerous school plays and community theatre productions."

During high school, Sawicki found that his passion for the movies was ably supported by his parents, who sent him to USC Film School for two years. It was there that he met a lot of the friends with whom he would go on to make *The Strangeness*, including director David H. Iman. Sawicki's partner in film class. "We made two films together in our second semester," Sawicki recalls. "At USC these films were referred to as 3-0s, which was the number of the class. The assignment was to make two black and white 16mm films with sync sound and no dialogue. The purpose was to force the student to relate a story visually without reliance on verbiage, an excellent exercise that handed down the traditions of silent film and pictorial language. Two students would partner up and trade places, being director and cameraman. I went first, with my film *I Stalked the Night*, which related a true story of me trying to break a girlfriend out of the house without my parents' knowledge. As the action was counterpointed with a made-up movie soundtrack that played on the television the father character was watching during the 'escape.' Unfortunately by the time David got to direct his film he had to leave school to support his wife and family, so he became an absentee film partner. We nonetheless finished his film, starring Pavo Broomquist (credited as Rolf Theison in *The Strangeness*), about a man who loses himself in a fantasy world that goes awry. The film had many in-camera effects and was an early training ground for me. It was entitled

University Travel, named after the local travel company that allowed us to use their storefront as a looking glass so that Pavo could pass through into his fantasy world."

Sawicki directed his graduate film *Origins* at USC, winning both a Silver Hugo and a Cine Silver Eagle. The film drew heavily on his youthful interest in special effects. "*Origins* depicted the creation of an alien world from an explosive starburst, the genesis of life in the sea, rising continents and the spawning of alien life on the land, all to be destroyed by yet another starburst that became the alpha and omega of everything. Pretty ambitious. The one big failure in the film was the recognition by the audience that I shot a lava lamp for some of the effects sequences, which I've since taken away. Other than that I think it was pretty successful as a mood piece."

Upon graduating, Sawicki returned to Jackson, Michigan, but after the excitement of USC, Jackson appeared to offer little advancement. For a while it seemed as though the film school adventure might lead nowhere. "Then I received a call from Peter Donen of Cinema Research Corporation, an optical printing facility. He had seen *Origins* at USC and invited me back to Los Angeles to clean film elements and run a black-and-white processor. I owe my entire career to Peter and I'm sorry to report that he passed away on 1 January 2004. He was the son of Stanley Donen and he gave many untired people their first break."



Sawicki's first film, *University Travel*, was used in the film *The Strangeness*. The film was used in the film *The Strangeness*. The film was used in the film *The Strangeness*. The film was used in the film *The Strangeness*.





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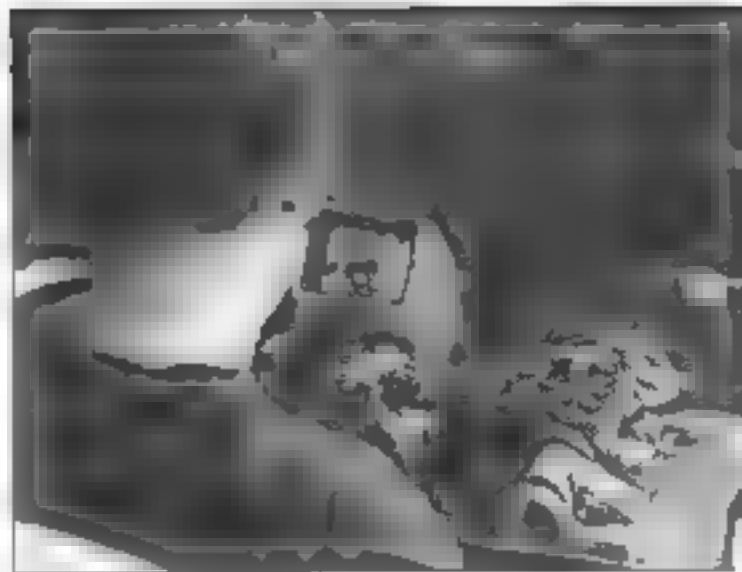
Introducing Chris Huntley

Chris Huntley was born in Long Beach, California in 1958. Like Sawicki, for as long as he can remember he's loved sci-fi, fantasy, and horror movies. "My earliest nightmares were inspired by *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Outer Limits*, and later even *Star Trek*," he recalls. "I went on a summer-school field trip to Los Angeles when I was fourteen, and went to several studios including Warner Bros. - they had recently finished filming *Willard* (1971). They still had lots of fake rats around the special effects and prop house. I was in heaven."

Work on *The Strangeness* provided Huntley with valuable new experience, thanks to his fellow artists. "Most of the effects expertise came from Mark Sawicki, with some help from Ernie Farnio. Mark knew how to create paraffin wax explosions, knew a lot about stop motion animation, and more. I knew how to make miniature models and build sets. I'd been making (and blowing up) models since I was a child. The rest we sort of figured out on our own. I'd been making short films since I was in the single digits. There was one occasion when I staged a fire outside my parents' house on the cement driveway. I had my brothers run in to tell the babysitter about the fire. She ran outside screaming as I tried to film her. Unfortunately there was a technical problem and the film jammed. The babysitter wouldn't do a second take. I also made films in high school."

At USC Huntley met Mark Sawicki and David Hillman. "Mark was a junior and I was a freshman," he explains. "I tagged along with Mark most of the time. He was very patient. At that time Mark and I also shared an apartment on campus with two other fellows. David had big aspirations and was really good at inspiring others to get involved. In the summer after their 310 graduation projects, the three of us decided to write a script together called *The Terminator* - unfortunately not then."

© 1997 by David Hillman



The Elusive David Michael Hillman

Sadly, director David Hillman, born in 1955, has remained impossible to trace for this book. Sawicki has nothing but praise for him. "David was a wonderful, gentle man, born and raised in Burbank, California. A true native. He was very happy-go-lucky and easy to work with. He always had grandiose ideas and a dollar-ninety-eight to do them! He could talk you into doing anything, and after you did 'the impossible' he was genuinely grateful. He didn't nitpick everything apart as many people do when they get things for nothing. If a shot didn't work as well as he hoped, he would edit around it. David was an editor by trade and prided himself on using editing to make up for filmic shortcomings. After *The Strangeness* I worked with him several times more, mostly on low-budget educational films, but it was always fun. No money, but fun," Sawicki has no idea where he is now, though. "He's pulled an *Eddie and the Cruisers* if that means anything to you. It's a film about someone who's been let off the face of the earth. So David, I guess, will remain a mystery wrapped in an enigma."



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Pre-Production

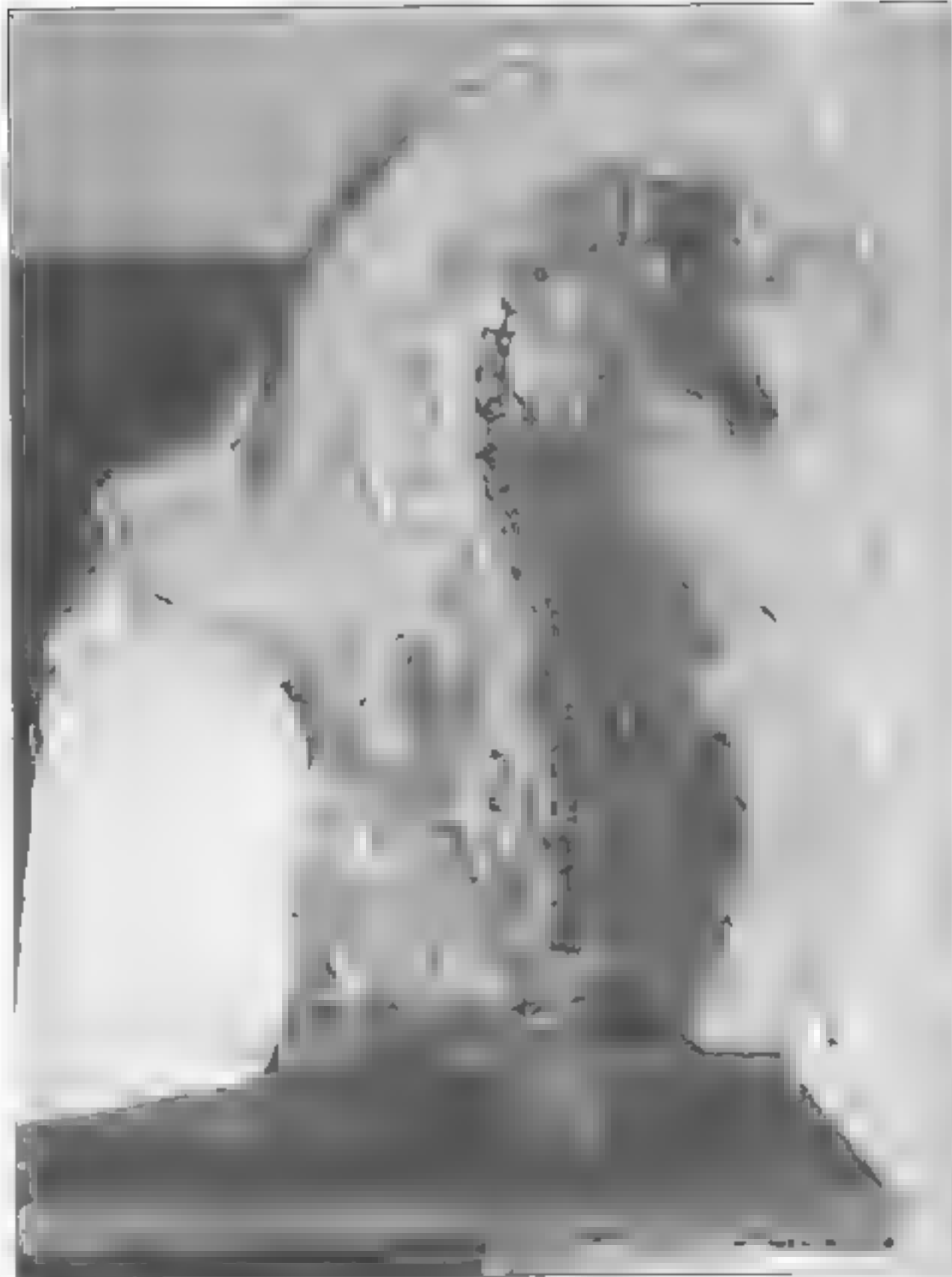
According to Huntley, the planned film began, not with a script or even a title, but a budget. In order to arrive at the lowest possible "realistic" budget for a full length feature, the decision was taken to shoot in 16mm film, with a 10:1 shooting ratio. They estimated that they could make a film in this way for the tiny sum of just \$15,000. Spurred by a single investor's offer of \$10,000, Huntley and Hillman began work on a script. The team decided that a horror movie was not only the ideal means to exploit their skills as model-makers and effects designers, but also fell within their modest financial reach. Not only that, but in 1979 horror was enjoying another of its frequent upswings in popularity, with big hitters like *Halloween*, *Phantasm*, *Alien* and *Dawn of the Dead* packing 'em in and attracting good notices. "Having decided the genre, we needed a story and location," explains Huntley. "We put the cart before the horse—that is, we let the location determine the story. I suggested a terrific location in northern California that my brothers had recently introduced me to, an old abandoned coal mine. We figured we could shoot the film on a two week schedule at the mine, thereby keeping equipment rental to a minimum, and obtaining incredible production value for minimum cost. Unfortunately, after we had completed our outline and were half way through the treatment, the logistics involved in moving an entire cast and crew that far, for that period of time, with no money budgeted for travel expenses, proved to be insurmountable. By the time that little bomb sunk in, it was too late for us to change the setting, because the backer wanted to see some script immediately and that was the only product we could show him. We began to contact other individuals, both to supply the remainder of the budget, and to join the cast and crew.

Points were offered in lieu of payment, and because money was now being discussed, it was time to establish a legally binding contract with the chief investor. "About this time, our initial investor backed town with his ten thousand bucks," says Huntley. "Two thirds of the entire budget suddenly disappeared."

Unwilling to cancel the production, for reasons of pride as well as the commitments made to cast, crew and smaller investors, the team continued in the hope that somehow the money would turn up. Hillman, Sawicki and Huntley decided to trade as Stellarwind Inc. to cover themselves against any personal liability should the project suffer further financial setbacks. They got themselves a lawyer, and for \$800 he drew up an incorporation contract. A further contract was signed to establish the production as a limited partnership, both to guarantee the investors a return, and to prevent them from interfering with the creative side of the production. This cost a further \$400 in legal fees. Huntley explains: "In essence, we, the producers, became a Board of Directors in a corporation acting as the General Partner designated as the Producer in a Limited Partnership Contract."

The problem of where the location work for the film would be shot came to a head when the team discovered, to their dismay, that the only other mine they could shoot in was 700 miles away, would cost \$4,500 a day in location fees, and had no electricity. The decision was taken to build sets.

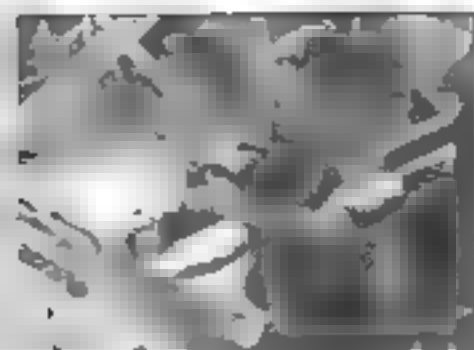
Meanwhile, the remaining investors had still not actually signed anything, and the production was



beginning to flounder. Feeling momentum slipping away Hillman, Sawicki and Huntley decided to arrange a two-day shoot at their own expense. The shoot was completed and then the other investors dropped out. Disaster loomed. It was at this point that Hillman's luck changed, although in a way none of the team would have preferred. A relative of Hillman's died and left him a small inheritance. As Huntley recalls, "Good fortune, although I hate to look at it that way. Unfortunately, the inheritance was tied up in probate for a year, with only small amounts occasionally available earlier. This was to become our production budget." "David had some investors," recalls Sawicki, "but after we'd shot a couple of weekends using borrowed equipment from David's job, they inexplicably pulled out. Then fate stepped in and one of David's relatives passed away, leaving him with just enough inheritance to finish the picture. We literally only had enough for film and lab. Cast and crew alike would be hauling equipment and building sets and everything."

Sawicki comments that the creature was a rather skimpy armature inside the mould of the creature. The model was for an air glider that was used to make the back of the monster.

© 1980 by the author



Stephen Greenfield

in ocean plate for later painting



Shooting *The Strangeness*

The Strangeness was truly a shoestring venture. Shot on 16mm reversal stock, academy ratio (a hoped-for 1.85:1 blow-up never materialised), its final budget weighed in at a sweet \$20,000 (Huntley pegs it at closer to \$25,000). It took nearly a year to complete, beginning in 1979 and finishing in 1980, seven months over its original three-month schedule, and was shot entirely at weekends, since most of the cast and crew already had regular jobs. Exteriors were photographed at the Red Rover Mine in the Canyon County region of Los Angeles and also along the rocky coast of a private beach belonging to Chris Huntley's grandparents. Specialised locations were not easy to afford on such a low budget, but the nature of the film demanded them nonetheless. "There was one great set we had, which was a mine exhibit at the Pomona Fair Grounds," Sawicki remembers. "David sweet-talked his way into using that for a couple of weekends, for free. It was great."

For the majority of the film's underground scenes, however, the team had to come up with the goods themselves. "We needed a quiet place to build the set as we could not acquire the use of a soundstage," Sawicki explains. "We tried a ranch in Malibu, but they wanted \$100 per weekend. So we ended up in a backyard in Burbank. Another relative's property." The sets ended up costing a mere \$700. For fans of the movie, the sheer extent of good material shot on these homemade sets can come as a bit of a shock. On a very low budget, the team created a fantastically convincing illusion of underground mine tunnels and crisscrossed workmen's chambers.

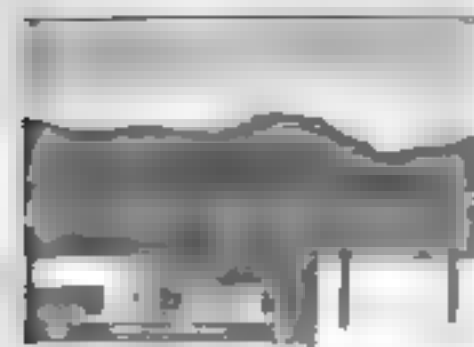
The main set was created in David's grandparents' backyard and garage," Sawicki reveals. "The garage was a cavern, and an L-shaped tunnel led out from that. At first we were puzzled as to how we were going to create the set

with no money. Plaster was discussed, foam rubber was too but found to be way too time consuming. We eventually wound up using chicken wire covered with industrial strength aluminium foil, painted to look like rock. It looked absolutely great, especially when illuminated by a single flare. The only drawback was that you didn't dare touch it or it would flamer like mad."

As shooting began, Sawicki was working as an animation-stand cameraman for Title House, and David Hilman was working as an assistant editor for Dave Bel Associates, a firm who made industrial films. Chris Huntley and Steve Greenfield were still at USC. "The only seasoned fellow we had was Ernie Farino, who did the titles and helped shoot some plates and did the mould work on the monster," says Sawicki. "I think he may have also animated a large tentacle. Unfortunately Ernie had to leave the production before it was completed to go on to a paying gig. He just recently won an Emmy for visual effects on the TV show *Children of Dune*." Sawicki's job at Title House meant he was able to use their animation camera, an aerial-image Oxberry that doubled as optical printer and animation stand for the optical compositing, while Hilman was initially able to borrow a 16mm camera from Dave Bel Associates.

In keeping with the production's 'all hands to the pump' ethos, Sawicki made use of his early acting experience to essay one of the lead roles, know-it-all journalist Dan Flanders. He has fond memories of working with Keith Hart, who played grizzled old mining expert Morgan. "I very much enjoyed working with Keith. I don't believe he was even a working actor outside of community theatre. What a creative fellow—a true natural. The scene where I'm interviewing him about his past and turning his coal mine into a diamond mine was completely improvised and written by Keith. We had rented all this camera equipment and were prepared to shoot several

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scenes with one of the female actors, who suddenly couldn't show. Kenb saved the day by inventing that scene on the spot, and it wound up in the picture.

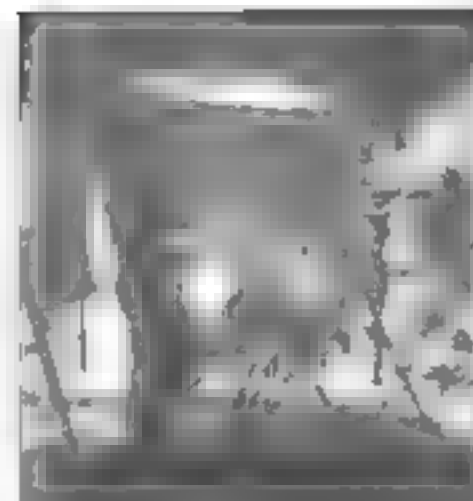
Sawicki found that lack of money sometimes stymied the confidence of the production: "Money is always a pressure, but you can't worry about it to the point of being frozen. We'd have discussions like, 'But we need a permit to shoot there,' and the solution was that we'd do it anyway and worry about it later. Nine times out of ten you can get away with it. You can worry yourself to a standstill." Sawicki also feels that the production was slowed down rather too much by discussions about plot. "We all got along very well on *The Strangeness*, but I seem to recall far too many 'film school' philosophical discussions. The biggest problem we faced was that all the principals went to the same film school and we were all experts on how to make the film. Too many cooks spoil the broth. The director has to be the final word in order for a production to run smoothly. If you sign on to be the director of photography, be that and nothing else. If you get someone on your crew to be the make-up person, let them be the make-up person and don't second-guess them. If you feel that the director has made a bonehead decision it's your job to keep yourself, not argue, and accomplish his or her request to the best of your ability. Of course there will be times when you have a disagreement. As an actor you might feel that a certain request is totally out of character. It is your job as an actor to *make it* your character and *make it* work. It's not productive to defend your point of view by refusing to perform. After all it's only a movie. I was proud of one contribution I made—our main characters were stuck in the lowest part of the mine with the creature and no one knew how to get them back to the surface. I came up with the idea of the underwater explosion that blows them out to the sea. It was met pretty coldly at first, but no one could come up with a cleaner ending that would get them out of the fix fast. I thought it played pretty well."

The film credits two cinematographers: Kevin O'Brien and Steve Greenfield. Sawicki explains, "Kevin O'Brien was associated with the Dave Bed company from whom we originally borrowed camera gear. I think that deal may have fallen through, and with it so did Kevin. Steve Greenfield was a USC alum as well and he did most of the camera work." In a film rife with shared roles, Chris Huntley is credited with directing additional scenes. Sawicki admits, "I don't recall which scenes Chris directed but I do know that he was the horror film aficionado and was quite excellent with that type of material. So if there was anything creepy or disturbing it was probably his." Huntley elaborates: "I wrote and directed the teaser sequence that appears before the titles. The same is true for the scene in which Geoff breaks down after Tony's death and runs through the mines after Hemmings. There was also a scene where Geoff and Dan are talking about the possibility of running into pockets of gas. I think there were a few more but it's been a long time since I've seen the movie."

Sawicki's character exits the film rather abruptly, with a jump and a glitch on the soundtrack that led me to wonder if something has been removed. Flanders turns to see the creature waving its tentacles, and then there's a cut to a shot of Geoff asleep in a nearby cavern. Geoff is woken by Flanders's scream. So is there a shot missing? "No, that's how it was intended," Sawicki says. The mess is more strategy again. By not seeing me "get

it" the audience could imagine anything, sort of like radio." He pauses: "It might have been better in retrospect to have seen more."

The aftermath of Flanders's demise also requires some explanation, as the British video release from VTC renders it somewhat mysterious. That's me stuck to the ceiling, Sawicki explains—there was a clever set-up to avoid attaching me to a ceiling for real. I was actually lying on the floor with my arm raised to make it look like I was crawling. We arranged the angle of the shot to match Geoff's point of view, but upside-down as well. We purposely composed the image upside-down to take advantage of the fact that the star-form is perturbed on both sides of the frame. If you splice the film end over end, bottom to top, then the crawling gets itself and the action runs in reverse, hence any ooze that was dripped on me appeared to fall from me. It's a very clever old camera trick that eliminates the need for an optical. I do remember Chris being a bit of a brat and purposely pouring some of that awful, medical-looking ooze on my arm during the shot." Huntley treasures the memory. "We had plans to shoot that scene in our own garage. Mark, Stephen Greenfield and I were housemates at that time). I made up



The "crawling"

Dave Huntley
the "crawling"





Sketch for the monster by

the corn starch goop, but the shooting was delayed for some reason. We rescheduled and shot the sequence on the following weekend. By the time we got around to actually shooting the effect, the goop had soured. I was the one to drop the stuff on Mark's face. I took a particularly large handful of the rancid, stinking goop and dropped it right in his mouth. Ah, the fun of being roommates!

One of the creepiest images in the film is the discovery of Chris Huntley's character Ruggles, drenched in monster slime and spitting white foam from his mouth. "Oh, this was a fun shot," Huntley recalls. "The goop was boiled corn starch. I was laying down on the floor of the mine set inside David's parents' garage (the set stretched from inside to outside and then some). It was two in the morning. It was freezing – you can see steam rising from me if you look closely enough. Once we got all the lights and camera set up and took the wide shots and reverse angles, it was time for the 'money' shot. The effect is simple. Someone filled my mouth with vinegar. We rolled film. Then David dropped a chunk of baking soda in my mouth. I closed my mouth and held it as long as I could before the stuff erupted from my mouth. Of course, it also went down my throat, up my nose, everywhere. But in the end, it was worth it for the shot we got. We only did it once.

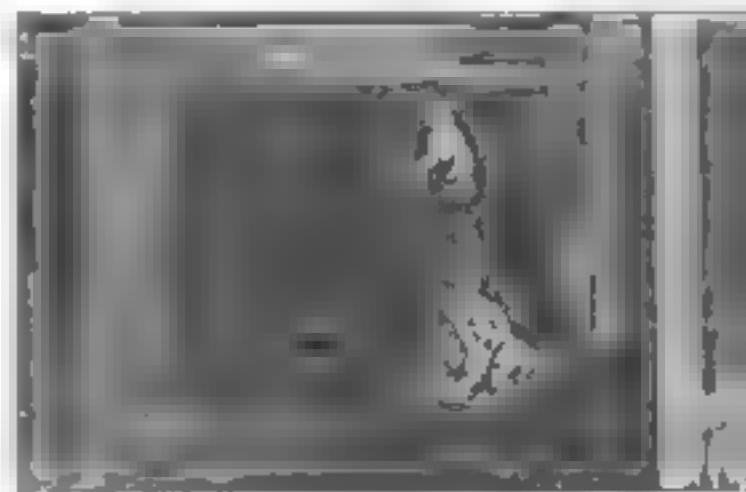
The low-level lighting of *The Strangeness* is its most distinctive but also its most problematic feature. Sawicki explains the thinking behind the movie's lighting style. "Well, we couldn't afford lights! And we didn't want the fantasy cave lighting look of studio pictures like *Journeys to the Center of the Earth* and *The Time Machine*... a trade-off. If you see the cave, then it's not a cave. It's the light source. If you hold to strict rules of motivational lighting you get really dark shots. We shot on 16mm ECO which had an ASA of 25, at the time, so you pretty much only saw the flares of the flare in the wide shots. Video only made this situation worse. We would try to make the image better on close-ups by holding lanterns very close to our faces and filling the screen with the lit character. If it was a wide shot with just flares or lanterns there wasn't enough ambient bounce to record an extensive area. One technique that helped was to fog up the interiors with stage smoke. It created a heavier atmosphere and gave the limited light sources something to work against, and we achieved more ambience and haloes. The use of smoke also helped the miniature sets, providing some shadows

Minatures played a significant role in the visual effects. Sawicki, whose childhood fascination with clay animation stood him in good stead for this, recalls. "We built the miniature set in our garage then closed the door and ignited an 'open ocean' emergency smoke flare, which filled the garage with bright orange smoke. We held our breath as best we could and grabbed as many shots as possible before asphyxiating. Our handkerchiefs were stained orange for a week! I don't recommend this to your readers. Buy a respirator or something. When you're young you don't think about safety, but it can come back to bite you years later. Our group is okay, but I've known many talented model-makers who are no longer with us due to cancers probably caused by the materials they worked with earlier in their careers.

The Monster

The Strangeness boasts a mind-boggling creature design: part penis, part vagina – and those with a psychoanalytical turn of mind may wonder, bearing in mind the film's setting, whether castration anxiety played a part in the design process. So was there a conscious attempt to work with such symbolism? "This is kind of embarrassing for me," laughs Huntley. "Consciously, I didn't think of those things when I designed the monster. The earlier designs even had a large, translucent sac attached to it so that it looked more snake-like. Everybody else saw the resemblance right away, and the monster soon got the nickname 'The Weegenay Monster' after one crew member's nickname for a vagina! The sac disappeared because it was too difficult to make, so we were left with the man-eating penis/vagina monster that secretes caustic goop on its victims. The reason I say it's kind of embarrassing for me is that I feel it is such a cliché that I designed it without consciously realising what I was doing. You see, I was closeted at that time and struggling with my sexuality. The only one I was fooling, obviously, was me. I finally came out as a gay man a couple of years later. Though I'm sure I wouldn't have found it funny then, I find it very funny now."

Chris Huntley designed the monster, which Sawicki then sculpted and animated. "I was the monster fan – and I could draw – so I went about designing it," Huntley says. "The film cost about \$18,000 originally, with an additional \$7,000 added later. Almost nothing of that budget went toward the monster effects. At the most, I'd say \$1,500/\$2,000, but probably more like \$500. It basically went on materials. Mark was working at a place where we could get the opticals composited for free (he did the work). We only had to pay for the film and development. I don't remember



October 1999

3360 comments. "This is Ernie prepping the sculpture for the second half of the two scene mould he made for us.

A further in the dark worthy of Lovecraft





8 A production still of the film.

a whole lot about working on the script. What I do remember is that it was sporadic. David would write something, then I'd write some more, then we go back and forth some more. It was pretty haphazard. We were more concerned with getting the plot right." "Most of the discussions revolved around protagonist, conflict, structure and all the story things we learned from school based on Lajos Egri's teachings," Sawicki remembers. "We never dealt with anything psychological."

Although *The Strangeness* trades successfully on its claustrophobic setting, the movie takes a while to deliver the dramatic goods, in other words, it's quite a while before we see the monster. Given that Huntley designed the creature, would he agree? "Certainly. I think there are bigger structural problems in the story than that, but from an entertainment point of view it could easily benefit from more monster. Having little money, we wanted to save the bang for the end. Unfortunately, there is little else in the story to hold attention long enough to get to the end. We were trying for a *Jaws* or *Alien* type of feeling. We just didn't have the budget to have the payoff of either of those movies."



A production still of the film used as reference to the creature to be eaten by

Post-Production, Screenings and Distribution

The film score is quite basic, but uses some effective synthesizer ambience to give the movie more atmosphere. Again, the core team were largely responsible. "David wrote and performed all the music," Sawicki remembers.

I thought it was quite nice. At that time, electronic synthesizers were becoming affordable. Our sound men were Tony Probst, who did a lot of good sound work on my student film *Origins*, and Tom Scurry. If Chris was credited with sound he probably worked closely with Tony to generate the creepy tones. Tony also did our negative cutting in the closet of the house that Chris, Steve, Sean, Phillips and I rented. We used the swimming pool for some of the underwater footage, the garage for the miniatures and animation, and my bedroom as a looping stage. We covered my bedroom floor with plastic and dirt and used a double system projector to simultaneously project and record at the same time to 'loop' the sound. The projector was placed outdoors and projected an image through a window into the bedroom. The sound recorded at the beach was unusable due to the crashing waves. We looped all of that material. The projector constantly ate the film and the process was very slow going.

Huntley adds, "I'd spent the previous couple of years taking electronic music classes at USC, because it was easy and fun. It came in handy during our production because I was able to use the USC recording studio. David also rented a synthesizer which we both played. We also did lots of layering in the soundtrack to help with the mood."

Initially, a film editor acquaintance had promised to keep up with the film as it came in, but when an 8,000-foot backlog had built up and he still had done nothing, it fell to Hilman to begin the task. With the aid of an assistant editor, he took fifteen days to synch up the dailies and a further thirty days to edit together a rough cut. When a distributor was referred to the production by a mutual friend, a ten-minute 'casser' was hurriedly assembled for his benefit. Without a completed 16mm print, the team were reluctant to let anyone see the rough footage, but to their surprise, they were swiftly offered a one-page distribution contract.

While the first distributor was drawing up a contract, a second got in touch. By this time, Hilman had assembled a rather shaky 85-minute rough cut. Huntley was downhearted. "The film was horrible. The first reel should have been, and eventually was, thrown to the four winds. It was so boring. Additionally, the rest of the film lacked any transition scenes, special effects, and the entire ending. It was far from in the can. The distributor was suitably unimpressed, and offered us some rather candid as well as useful, criticisms. Subsequently, we slipped into an unproductive two-week depression. This might well have been the end of the film. Months of work, thousands of dollars, and every last drop of creative energy appeared to have been spent for the making of a boring, predictable piece of druck."

Still, the first distributor had yet to see the completed version. There was still time to make changes. Shaken but resolute, the team dragged their asses back to the project.

"We cut the first ten minutes of the film out entirely," says Huntley, "and incorporated as many of the second distributor's suggestions as possible. Finally we arranged a screening for the initial distributor." It went better than

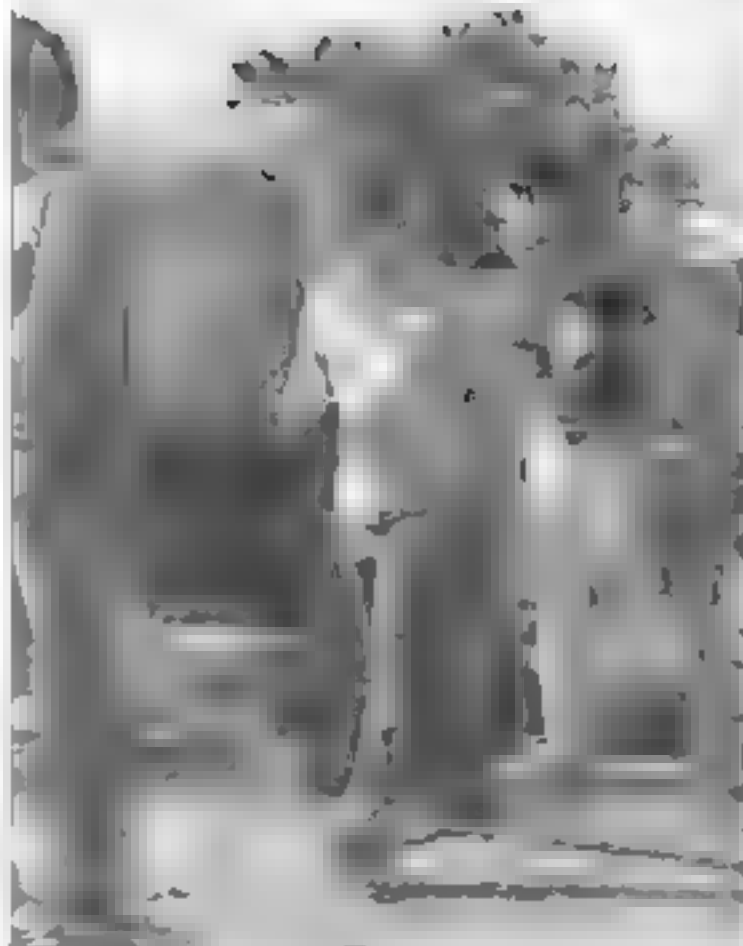
the first. "The distributors weren't overly impressed, but they offered a welcome optimism and they even seemed to enjoy it. They too made suggestions, which were immediately incorporated into our reshooting plans. They liked it enough to hand us a contract right then and there. I though incredibly tempted to sign immediately and screen won out, and it's a good thing too. We discussed the contract with our lawyer and managed to include a couple of self-protecting clauses to prevent us from financial responsibility for such things as 35mm blow-up and subtitled versions. We would only have to supply these items after the distributors had sold sufficient territories to cover the cost.

I undely found the legal advice they received absolutely invaluable. "I can't overstate the importance of showing everything to a lawyer" is *staples*. Although parties to a contract may be on the best of terms, if it isn't in writing it isn't so. For example, unless specified, one party may be construed to have the authority to run up debts in the name of the other. This is a clause of omission. It's easy to spot something wrong that is there but it takes a lawyer to spot what *isn't* there and *should* be. Although the omission was not intentional on the distributor's part, it could have been used to their advantage should disagreements arise at a later date. The distributors gladly agreed to the change. One expense the team did have to swallow was the provision of advertising materials - pressbooks, promo reels on videotape artwork, written copy, etc. - which had to be produced pronto in time for the film to be ready for sale at Cannes just a month later.

When a sale to video was clinched, that was the end of the process, and a less than rewarding end it was too. "A. I remember was a very dark office where David, Chris and I were gathered to sign a distribution contract," says Sawicki. "It reminded me of the atmosphere of *The Godfather*. A. David's money was tied up in the film and he needed to recoup something. Chris and I were not about to stand in his way so we signed. It probably wasn't a great deal. I remember only receiving a royalty check for \$25 and I was one of the producers! But I only had sweat equity in the movie so it didn't much matter to me. We all received experience and some great footage for a reel."

I can't elaborate. "What I remember about the video deals is that we got screwed several times by several low-life distributors before we got it to a semi-legit group. We had people selling foreign rights to *The Strangeness* who didn't even have a contract with us. It was like there was a slimy, dishonest, Hollywood shyster around. He'd find us. That was, by far, the worst part of making his film. After the initial screening of the first answer print, I pretty much dropped out of the loop. David kept the film alive and is responsible for its eventual release on tape and on video.

A cast and crew screening was arranged at the Norris Theater on the USC campus. Sadly, it was to be the first and only time *The Strangeness* would play on the big screen. It never did secure a national distribution, and instead, as was becoming the norm in the 1980s, went straight to video. Sawicki wryly recounts the only time he came into contact with a paying member of the audience: "I do remember seeing it at a local video store in the hands of a patron. I rushed up to the fellow and asked why he decided to rent that particular picture, and his response was, 'I've seen everything else.'"



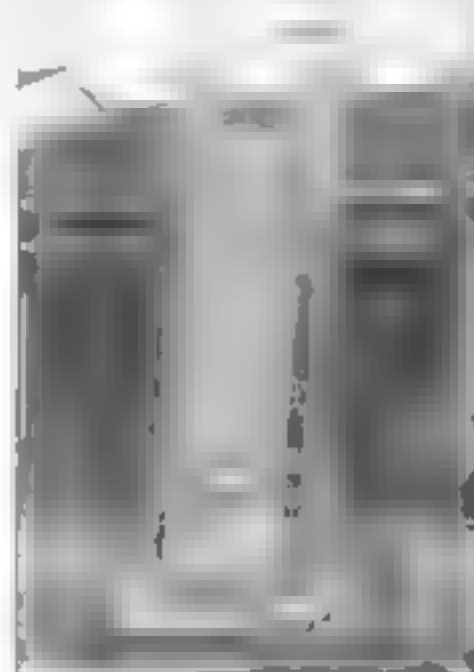
So how would Chris Huntley describe the strengths and weaknesses of the film? "For the most part it was technically competent, especially for the cost. Decent subsequence in rigging monster. Some good horror effects and explosions. Weaknesses? It's boring (a cardinal sin for exploitation films). Most of the creative elements are pretty bad. The dialogue is corny. The story structure is non-existent. It's lucky it makes any sense at all. Much of the darker material does not translate to video. In film the dark scenes are at least visible. Hokey acting. Need

Sawicki readily concedes that the film has flaws. "I regret that there was little follow through with the characters. We see the old man take a swig of booze but nothing comes of that. We see the young man make a pass at the reporter's wife and nothing comes of that either. We had some good characters who were under-utilised and so the film suffers, as did many of the horror pics of this culture, from too many scenes of people walking here to there and back again. I would like to have seen some sex or at least one ~~under~~ one brief underwater wet T-shirt shot. We seemed to pull too many punches and that may have been because David relied on his family a great deal to make the picture. They fed us, they let us keep a cave set in the yard for a year etc. I think, in many ways, David made a nice film for his folks to see. Aside from nice things, I do think that we could have seen much more of the monster. We were trying for the *Jaws* approach, because we didn't think the monster would hold up under close scrutiny. We certainly didn't want it to start looking comical. I think in retrospect, it might have been nice if there was a spin-off threat spawned by the monster that would lend excitement in an ancillary way. The people who get slurped by the thing become ~~zombies~~ zombies, or something. The only other weakness I can think of is that my character was killed off much too soon."



Strangeness
walking in the
Hillman This photo was taken of David
grandparents back yard
cure set was on
ended in a cave room with
garage in the back
partial chicken wire frame work
the walls

Sawicki comments: "The aluminum foil cave of explosions in. The chimney on the inside of the chimney. We set off an exploded the fireball rocket."



If You Go Down in the Caves Today

Out of the Mine

After *The Strangeness*, Hartman made one more feature film called *Brothers of the Wilderness* (1983), a G-rated children's adventure about a boy and his dog on a treasure hunt. Sawicki played the lead villain. "My character was a bit of a disgruntled neocomp type. Needless to say, I very much enjoyed that part! I thought it played pretty well and it was fun to work on. I was financed by a fellow who made or distributed suitcases, I believe. His name was George Bamber. It was all shot in Big Bear, California. After that, David continued making educational. The last film I worked on with him was *Cincinnati Bones and the Temple of Health* (1988). This was an anti-drug educational that David starred in and produced. I did the visual effects. It was quite well received in schools.

Luntney recalls his own trajectory after *The Strangeness*. "We finished *The Strangeness* the summer after I graduated from USC film school. I promptly got a job waiting tables. Six months later I landed a job at Graphic Films, a special effects house with alumni such as Douglas Trumbull, Ben Burt, and John Dykstra. I spent two years working on an Omnimax space film called *Tomorrow in Space* (1982). It should have been called 'Tinkertoys in Space.' During my work on that, Stephen Greenfield and I started our own software company called Screenplay Systems. We created *Scriptor*, a screenplay formatter, for which we received the 1994 Technical Achievement Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. We created *Movie Magic Budget* and *Movie Magic Scheduling*, which have been the industry-standard estimation and production software since their introduction in the 1980s. We developed the *Dramatica* software, and other writing software as well. We're still business partners, twenty-two years and going. We changed our company's name to Write Brothers Inc. in 2002, to better represent our product line. For me, I'd say that making the film did not directly help me to get other work. But it was an essential step in the long evolution and development of a new theory of story. Some of our conversations during *The Strangeness* became the basis of work David and I later did in 1990. We ended up creating a new theory of story called *Dramatica*.¹ We did a lot of philosophical talking about story structure, before, during, and after *The Strangeness*, trying to discover the basic patterns of characters and plot in stories. What were the essentials? What parts were fluff? We obviously didn't figure any of that out during the production of *The Strangeness*! In fact, it was the film's bad structure that got David and me thinking about story structure in a big way. From these discussions we determined that there were generally eight archetypal characters found in most action-adventure-type stories. We also determined that they came in pairs. There were the protagonist-antagonist pair, the sidekick-sceptic pair, the reason-emotion pair, and the guardian-conquering pair (we created the name conquering because we couldn't find any reference to this character: he is the hindering tempter, such as Darth Vader in *Star Wars*). This was a simplistic view of characters, but there seemed to be some fundamental truth associated with it.

Sawicki's film career leapt forward in 1984 when he snared a job with up-and-coming director James Cameron on his sci-fi adventure classic *The Terminator*. "Erma-

Farino was responsible for getting me on *The Terminator* after Fantasy Two's optical man quit in the middle of the production," Sawicki recalls. "I came up with a variety of processes for the original Terminator vision. I owe my jump to the big leagues to Bill Taylor ASC of Illusion Arts. Bill came into my life a bit later, in 1986. After *Terminator* I worked for Celestial Mechanics with Sean Phillips, doing opticals for television commercials. We also did almost all of the 3D feature title sequences during the 3D Summer. *Jaws 3-D*, *Friday the 13th Part 3*, *Metastorm*, they were all titles that Sean Phillips devised. Sean, as you recall, was one of the roommates at the house we shot *The Strangeness* in, and provided the spray paint compressor to paint our set. He's a brilliant 3D specialist. Sean now directs and does visual effects on large format venues like MAX.² With *Friday the 13th Part 3*, I seem to recall that we didn't work on the film properly but did many last minute hurried tests to prepare the film for anaglyphic projection for drive-ins. You see, most successful 3D processes use polarized glasses and a silver screen that can reflect the different polarities of the right and left eye. Conventional screens or those found in drive-in theatres need to separate the eyes through colour separation, typically cyan and red filters. This anaglyphic system can create the 3D and some sensation of pseudo colour. It is usually not very successful. I believe the studio passed on the making of special anaglyphic prints once they saw the tests. It was quite an experience though, as Paramount opened up Movietone in Hollywood for us, at the cost of \$10,000 for the weekend. My test footage was the only film that was processed and printed on that weekend and I was able to experience walking through all the processing steps at the lab. I sort of felt like royalty.

Sawicki continued to pick up new knowledge of cameras and optical technology, as film industry techniques went into development overdrive in the 1980s and 1990s. "While I was at CM (Celestial Mechanics) I began to experiment with blue screen, and went back to the original Vlahos patent to learn how to do it from the source. I always seemed to be the sole cameraman wherever I worked and therefore was self-taught. To my extent I had heard that Bill Taylor was one of the best practitioners of blue screen in the business. He was Albert Whittlock's matte cameraman. I called him one day to ask about blue screen and he invited me over to Universal to look over my notes and blue screen tests. He was very generous with information and a great help to me. I think he must have been impressed with my self study, because when Universal dissolved their matte department and Bill formed Illusion Arts with his partner Syd Dutton, he called me to ask if I would work for him. I was working on rock videos at the time, having a lot of fun but making no money. When he called I couldn't believe it. I accepted and overnight I was in the feature film matte painting business. My first project was *The Gate*, which was supervised by Bill and Randy Cook. Randy went on to be one of the principal effects artists on *The Lord of the Rings*. Illusion Arts was a great experience. I became one of the most talented matte cameramen. The digital age pretty much wiped out that wonderful tradition. A terrific book that I would highly recommend is *The Invisible Art* by Craig Barron. It covers the history of matte painting from its origins in silent cinema to the digital age. I was happy to see that some of the paintings I composited are

featured in the book. Alas my name is not mentioned, but I feel truly blessed to have been part of such a spectacular art-form. I spent ten wonderful years at Fusion Arts, and when I was asked by Tim McHugh of Area 51 to come on board as a co-supervisor for *From the Earth to the Moon* produced by Tom Hanks, Ernie Farino was the principal supervisor. After the Hanks project finished I was out looking for work again and discovered the down side of being with one company for ten years. The digital transition took over the industry and I discovered that my network of people were no more. Most of the small effects shops went out of business and were replaced by large corporate entities like Cinesite and Sony. The schools had flooded the market with inexpensive digital labour and the normal demand for experience was replaced with whoever knew the latest software version. The globalisation of the workforce has also had a devastating effect on Hollywood employment. I was fortunate in that my wife was an early adopter of digital processes – she went on to work for all the major studios around that time. Her last feature was Disney's *Dinosaur*. She all too rapidly saw the decline of the digital effects business into a sort of glorified secretarial pool. She has transitioned into teaching, and I have gone back to optical camerawork. I may very well be the last of the optical cameramen. I have been at Custom Film Effects working on features for about five years now and spend my spare time creating fine art sculpture and acting on occasion. Custom Film put the optical printers out to pasture in 2005 and I went on to be a digital colourist and on set visual effects cameraman. Before the printers were replaced I made a short film homage to the craft called *Twilight Cameraman*.³ I am very fortunate to still be working in the field in Hollywood."

Sawicki is upbeat about recent developments in video technology and their possible impact on filmmaking. "It is a fabulous time to be a filmmaker now. The technology is completely accessible. Anyone can afford to make a movie and not go broke. I recently appeared in a mini-DV feature, *Reetama* (2004, dir. Mark Pirro), that was made for a fraction of what *The Strangeness* cost, with much more production value. The ability for new filmmakers to get exposure is tremendous. I acted in a film directed by visual effects supervisor Kevin Kutchaver for the 48 Hour Film Festival, where the challenge is to make a film in that allotted time. Kevin's film, *Mysterious Tapes of Unexpected Horror*, is now broadcast over the Internet and will be seen at the Arc Light Theater across from the Cinerama Dome in Hollywood. The world is at your feet. The challenge is that cinema has become the paperback novel of the 21st Century. It will be hard to stand out from the crowd."

The Strangeness, too, has had difficulty standing out from the crowd these past twenty years. Lost in the shuffle during the early eighties video explosion, it's never received much attention in the horror press, and what reviews there have been have scarcely looked beyond the film's murky lighting. But even if the film really is like a dusty old paperback novel, something one might pick up with idle curiosity in a bookshop crammed to the ceiling with forgotten titles, Sawicki and Huntley show us that it's often incredibly rewarding to investigate the shady corners, away from the hard-cover classics and the groaning racks of Stephen Kings. Because flaws and failings and all, there's still so much to learn from *The Strangeness*, and from the men who made it happen.

If You Go Down in the Caves Today



Addendum. Chris Huntley wrote these tips for filmmakers on a low budget back in 1980, and they're still worth repeating today:

- 1) Make sure your script is completely locked down before you begin production. You risk shooting several scenes that are no longer necessary, as well as creating many discrepancies and loose ends in plotline and character development that can never be fully corrected.
- 2) Unless you are absolutely sure of someone's abilities as an actor, and this includes friends especially, have them read through scenes extensively, preferably with other actors who have already been cast.
- 3) Never start your production without your entire budget in the bank. It is quite possible to run completely out of money midway through a film and never get it completed.
- 4) Never underestimate your budget in your enthusiasm to get the project off the ground. Allow 25% of your budget for advertising expenses. If this is your first film you will likely be required to pay for all advertising materials used.

Production is a hell of a lot more fun when you're not broke. Sawicki performs the same

Candy (Teri Berland) gets to

Calvert (Dan Calvert) is the only one who doesn't die. The party gather round the body, and Calvert is the only one who doesn't die. The *Strangeness* was rather obscure, but it was the only one of its kind. It was issued on DVD in the UK by the budget-conscious 23rd Century, although copies are rare.

Considering the design of the monster, the shot should probably go on. More. Calvert finds evidence of the monster's presence.

Vigilante of 42nd Street

Robert Endelson on *Fight for Your Life*

Fight for Your Life (1977)

Is *Fight for Your Life* a tell-it-like-it-is slice of action or a callous exploitation flick having a laugh by goading the liberal viewer's nerves? Any and all of these would say, but contrary to common misconception it's not racist. The film has been attacked over the years for making an unacceptably indulgent window display of a villain's racial prejudice, and it's true that the hateful Kane (William Sanderson) enjoys the lion's share of screen time, but viewers of a suspicious nature who wish to ascribe the villain's values to the filmmaker should think again. Taken as the energetic tabloid fiction it is, *Fight for Your Life* is a bruising, nerve-rattling experience as pacy and unpretentious as the blaxploitation films it resembles. The title says it all really, making clear the film's ultimate sympathies: this story of a nice suburban black family attacked by a trio of deranged killers charts the slow, painful accumulation of their rage, and their justified thirst for vengeance.

Endelson sets up a broad, almost cartoonish conflict, between three low-life hoods and a family teetering on the verge of sainthood. From this basis, the committed cast take Straw Weisman's pungent, delectable script into orbit. Sanderson is the focus of the film, and although the script gives him the ammo, the actor's skill and guts deliver the killer shot. A glimmer of restraint on his part would ruin the film; we really need to see the worst in Kane's character, and Sanderson duly delivers. His energy and passion account for the nervousness with which the film has often been greeted. Here is an actor really sinking his teeth into a role, with an abandon to the imperatives of character that ranks alongside better-known, more fêted "dark-side" explorers like Harvey Keitel and James Woods.

The bravest performer of the film, next to Sanderson, is Robert Judd, playing the black middle-class pastor and father whose New Testament values are challenged by the attack on his home, his family and his masculinity. Seen from this angle, *Fight for Your Life* is the antithesis of a white power fantasy — it's virtually a Black Panther recruitment film, delaying the righteous violence of the suitably named Turner family until the last possible

moment. The incendiary sado-masochistic tension is so acute it's almost pornographic. One thing, for sure: a white man watching this film in a black area of New York would feel pretty nervous as he left the theatre.

Savantica IV, *Fight for Your Life* is no-nonsense get-the-story-told exploitation. Conflict is explored chiefly through the dialogue and acting, with the editing occasionally used for heightened directorial emphasis. There are few camera tricks to abstract what we're seeing. Endelson keeps the lid on his film technique, pushing the viewer's buttons without drawing attention to himself. It's hard-nosed, professional NYC filmmaking, never

Jesse Lee Kane (William Sanderson)
and Chino (Daniel
Ted Turner) (Robert Judd)





dreaming of intruding on the story with lyrical, expressionistic or 'arty' flourishes. But what *Fight for Your Life* may lack in poetry it makes up for in brass-necked nerve. Not only does it take the race issue by the horns, bulldozes another taboo area, unusual even for exploitation. How can I put this delicately – they kill the kid! So what's the big deal? Well, even the most cynical horror films tend to sidestep the murder of children. Honourably nihilist exceptions include Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, Lucio Fulci's *The Beyond* and Michael Haneke's art-house horror *Funny Games*, but you can tell how rare this is by the way the hairs stand up on the back of your neck when Ling (Peter Yoshida) offs the little tyke (which one I won't say – there are two in the film...). The shock is even more profound because the boy is set up as the family's potential saviour.

The movie's climax is deferred perhaps a shade too long, but it's a close call. When it comes it's immaculately handled, and when Turner humiliates Kane by taunting him about the "big black backs" who punked him in jail, you could even argue that the script shows a glimmer of sympathy for Kane's wretched character. The sight of the weaselly little monster flustered and deflated, as these words probe the truth, suggests how psychological understanding could have undone the villain's authority. Instead Turner's taunts are simply a nasty and effective *coup de grâce*.

"Vengeance is mine," sayeth the Lord (allegedly), but *Fight for Your Life* is having none of it. The script privatises heavenly judgement, relentlessly berating Christianity as a force which keeps the good guys down. In one of the film's most jolingly aggressive sequences, the Pastor is beaten around the head with his own Bible (in footage that Endelson speeds up slightly, creating a genuinely weird, disturbing effect).

An eleventh hour confusion between sympathetic cop and vengeful father provides a liberal-baiting, last squib, something to argue about in the bar afterwards, proving that *Fight for Your Life* is consummate tabloid cinema, rabble-rousing exploitation in which a sense of social responsibility begins and ends in the ticket hall. If it does have a political conscience it's essentially non-racist, right-libertarian, pro-gun, anti-liberal. Like most. What would you do if your family was attacked? Well, here's a goading quality to the movie – a desire to see social restraints on retribution stripped away. The racial aspect of *Fight for Your Life* is ultimately less crucial – and less problematic – than its appeal to vengeance, with Endelson aligning his sympathies to such urban nightmare cure-alls as *Death Wish*.

"The racism exploitation movie to end them all. Calculated to drive inner city audiences berserk with rage for an hour and a half before giving whiteness its comeuppance, it would also be suitable entertainment for a Ku Klux Klan barbecue." *Bill Landis, Slitazoid Express (book)*

Fight for Your Life, shot in 1976 by Robert Endelson, and released in '77 by New York distributor William:

As is one of the most widely misunderstood movies of the era. Denied a certificate to this day in Great Britain, it's a perfect illustration of the way content can cast a shadow on the character of the filmmaker. It portrays a black family held hostage by vicious racist criminals, and uses dialogue as unflinching as the action. Perhaps it's a testament to the grim intensity of *Fight for Your Life* that reviewers have frequently assumed racism *behind* the camera.

It's certainly something that crosses your mind when watching for the first time, the dialogue crystallizes racist contempt in such a forceful way that one initially has a difficulty separating the speaker from the spoken. The situation has been exacerbated because Endelson dropped out of the film industry, and has until now declined to speak about the movie.

So who is Robert Endelson? When Martin Scorsese first went to meet David Cronenberg, having seen the Canadian's early films *Shivers* and *Rabid*, he admits he was expecting someone who looked, "like Renfield...lobbering for juicy flies." If even a genius like Scorsese can assume a direct link between subject matter and artist, imagine how distorted our mere mortal impressions of Endelson have become over the years.

I first made contact with Bob in 2002, just after he was contacted by Blue Underground, who were about to reissue *Fight for Your Life* on DVD. He turned down their request to participate on the commentary track, but he did agree to talk to me for this book, which makes this the first time his views have been set down anywhere. I found him as forthright and vigorous as his movie suggests, with a very firm declaration to make about his personal views on race. It's time to let Robert Endelson speak for himself, and set the record straight.

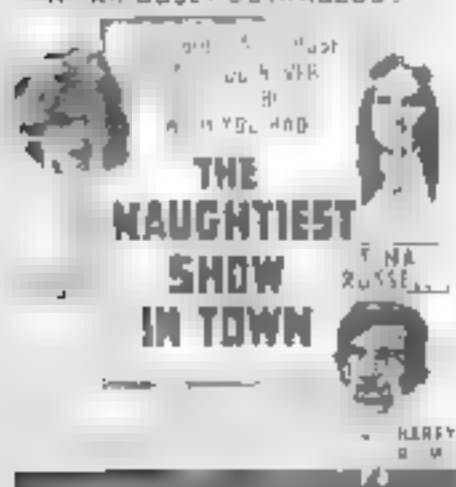
A Pause for Clarification

Robert Endelson: "The first point I want to make is, I watched the movie this morning with a friend of mine, a woman of colour, who had never seen the movie before. And she said to me, 'This is not a racist film. This doesn't promote racism, it does precisely the opposite, it shows you how terrible racism is. And there's racism on both sides of the family, when the mother says 'Why do you invite that white girl to the house?'" He pauses, then adds, "It's a story about racist confrontation. It doesn't promote racism."

There's no doubt that Endelson is sensitive to the way the film has been perceived. The friend to whom he referred is his 'Family Assistant' (that's 'maid' to English readers).

And I had the unexpected pleasure of chatting briefly to her on the phone one day. Endelson insisted, and put aside the receiver calling, "Dorothy! You got a moment?" Moments later Dorothy is on the speaker-phone. I ask her what

"RIDICULOUSLY OUTRAGEOUS!"



he figured I would be a good co-pilot. I started flying when I was sixteen and had my licence by the time I was nineteen. There was a seaplane base near our home on Long Island and I used to hitchhike down, without my parents' permission, and take flying lessons. Even before I got my full licence, I would land in the nearby backwater swamp areas in a seaplane, pick my friends up from their boat, fly around, then land and drop them off again, because if I came back to the seaplane base with passengers they would have taken my student licence away. We were very near to Kennedy Airport, those were the days before all the restrictions. I lived about twenty miles from Kennedy Airport and as long as you stayed below five hundred feet nobody bothered you. Today they would send a jet and shoot you down. The rule-book then was a quarter of an inch thick and today it's two inches thick! I haven't flown in over three years because I've made everybody crazy, but I still hold my pilot's licence.

Endelson feels that the very reason he did poorly in school helped him find a niche in the film industry: "I had what they would call today 'attention deficit disorder' - I was lazy, didn't do well in school, but I had a talent for very specific things, like building ham radios. I liked building and putting things together and taking things apart. I never took my friends' stuff apart though, only my father's stuff! So I was very mechanical-minded, which made picking up the mechanics of cinematography easy, especially with my background in still photography. I became a cinematographer and worked on several low budget films, some of which were porno films, which most young filmmakers of my generation made when they were in their twenties. If you look in the American Film Institute catalog under 'Francis Ford Coppola', the first movie listed is called *Flesh and Lace*. When you're a hungry young filmmaker all you want is to run film through a camera and have somebody pay for it!"

Today, Endelson's memory of this fascinating period is frustratingly vague, but he remembers enough to make you wish you could hire a hypnotist. "We were given the script on three three-inch by five-inch cards showing the beginning, middle and end, and we would have to make everything else up. One of them was *The Student Nurses*

my name isn't on it, but it was one of the more successful.³ Some of them were full hardcore, but a lot of it was faked. We had our own special effects, a lot of milk and sugar-water! And turkey-baster bulbs with little tubes. You could only go so far with some actresses but they didn't mind the sugar water. The actresses would fill out these questionnaires: you know, which orifices? Will you do animals? laughs! There was a guy called Carl Russell who would hire you, and you did anything just to shoot film, and see the result, and experiment. We used to shoot on hundred-foot rolls that he would buy somewhere cheap, so every minute you had to change the roll, you couldn't shoot anything longer than a minute. We used ends, anything that we could run through the camera that would produce an image. I never saw any of them finished. I saw the rushes when they came back from the lab, just to see what the cinematography looked like, but then I had no further interest.

Ladies and Gentlemen: 'The Filthiest Show in Town'

Working in New York's commercial underground, Endelson came into contact with various phosphorescent figures in the shadows of the industry. "Jerry Darmiano I knew. I never worked with him but I met him once at a distributor's office and I had someone who was a mutual friend. I met him at a little gathering after he had made *Deep Throat*. Herb Sreichler, who was 'Harry Reems' I knew very well, because he worked on my picture *Filthiest Show in Town*.⁴ He was one of the brightest, nicest, sweetest people you could imagine."

Filthiest Show in Town, shot in 1972, was Endelson's first feature film.⁵ As he recalls, "I said to my father, 'wanna make a movie, and he gave me \$25,000 to do it, which was a lot of money in those days. I was lucky my

Filthiest Show in Town gained the definite stamp for its UK video release by Mountain, an importing company who appear to have generated their own artwork with an instantly recognisable in-house artist. As well as 'terror' film Mountain released the US 'pornography' *Les Equinox* and *Astro-Zombies* and a string of American sex movies: *Guns*, *The Female Response*, *Tenage Tramp* and the psychedelic erotica *Madame Zenobia*.



tother had the money. He was a very practical man and he would rather invest in his son's movie than some school or university fee. So I went out and made that movie – it was shot in four days, in two locations – and we showed it to twelve distributors, who turned it down, because it's a pretty terrible movie! The thirteenth distributor was William Mishkin, who was a very smart man. It was originally called *The Maiden Game*, a take-off of *The Dating Game*, a nude version.⁸ Mishkin was brilliant enough to retitit *Fiftieth Show in Town*, and paid for it to be blown up from 16mm to 35mm. He knew how to promote it, and the movie made quite a bit of money over the next three years, between domestic and international sales.

Pre-dating the similarly themed box-office hit *The Love Tube* by two years, *Fiftieth Show in Town* (the onscreen title omits the definite article) is a sex-oriented skit on dating shows and television commercials, featuring Harry Reems and A-list porn star Tina Russell. When tapes of a sexually explicit game show, 'The Maiden Game', are seized by police, the station bosses, a Jew and an Italian-American, and themselves prosecuted for obscenity. During the court case, the jury are shown clips from the show, featuring nudity, sex and obscene language. A State prosecutor seeks to prove that the 'moral decay' of society can be laid at the door of shows like *The Maiden Game*, while the defence argues on the basis of freedom of speech. Various witnesses are summoned: the prosecution calls the recent winners of the 'Family of the Year' competition, who assert that their once polite children have turned bratty and unmanageable since exposure to the show, while a representative of a Women's Rights organisation, called to offer her views on the corrosive effect of pornography, announces that she buys piles of the stuff to prevent it falling into the hands of perverts. The defence calls a psychiatrist who tells the court that the real sickos are the moral majority, who damage society by withholding sexual information from children and repressing sexuality in adults. Happily, despite the obvious bias of the judge (Marshal Anker) in favour of the prosecution, the jury are more interested in watching further clips from the show.

Okay, it's not the most sophisticated sex comedy in the world. It's the sort of film in which a judge inadvertently uses a dildo as a gavel (in fact dildos seem to be an obsession here, as they feature both physically and verbally throughout – look out for a brief scene with Sandra Cassel, Mar Collingwood in *The Last House on the Left*) handling an angry, red-veined example in one of the film's numerous mock commercial spots). But while the constant sexual references become rather exhausting (the characters have names like 'Doris Dryhole', 'Phyllis Phallus' or 'Peter Ramrod'), the underlying argument about the hypocrisy of censors is at times quite sharply conveyed. Given that the film was released in 1972 when the *Deep Throat* trials were under way and XXX cinemas were being raided by the police, it's admirable that the Endelson brothers should have gone for tub-thumping libertarian advocacy on top of their softcore full-frontal orgies (even if they are 'preaching to the perverted'). The puns are awful, the obscenities are corny and juvenile (I'm sure I would have laughed myself sick over this when I was fourteen), but the criticisms about religious attitudes still raise a smirk or two. You can get a flavour of the mix from this example, in which a 'Maiden Game' contestant, a very fresh-faced Reems, is introduced to the studio audience thus: 'He advocates the theory that going to the toilet is unholy – and he holds the world record

for constipation! From Rottencrotch Missouri, it's my pleasure to welcome... Barney Schwartz!'

The tone of the film is consistently scornful of the Church, something that comes over in *Fight for Your Life* too. At one point, a Catholic priest informs the jury that

Watching the show is alright, as long as you hate yourself for it afterwards! Well, I didn't hate myself, nor the filmmakers, because despite the film's silliness and repetition, it's still a fairly watchable time-waster if you're interested in the period, and the context in which it was made.

With his first movie completed and sold to one of New York's foremost Hollywood distributors, Endelson made plans for a follow-up. 'I developed another movie, that never got made, called *The Vigilantes of New York*. It was written by the now-famous Jesse Kornbluth. I paid Kornbluth \$5,000 to write it, the most money he ever got paid for a project, up to then. He was a great, intelligent, well-read, sophisticated young guy (whose education and ego got in the way of learning anything from a pipsqueak like me). He was a terrible scriptwriter from the get-go, I think twenty years later he taught scriptwriting – if you can't do it, teach it. With me working literally over his shoulder, a script was turned out. We were within a week of starting – this was around 1973, a year before *Death Wish* came out in 1974. It was like there was something in the air. And the investor, a big wheeler-dealer, suddenly lost a lot of money in the commodities market, and he says, 'I'm sorry, I can't complete my commitment to you to make the movie. This was a big \$65,000 movie, and it was very depressing because we had cast it – Sylvester Stallone had come in, this was before he was cast in *The Lords of Flatbush*.' Recalling his encounter with the future star of *Rambo*, Endelson adopts a creditable Stallone inflection. 'I'm gonna be one o' dah best actors dere ever is. I know I could be one of dese vidge-landies!'



The man from Mountain is at it again. The reverse side of the UK video cover for *Fiftieth Show in Town* features the knowing if bizarre caricature 'putting shoes' of the country's then-fettest moral campaigner Mary Whitehouse, head of the National Viewers and Listeners Association. Whitehouse, whose archaic news went thankfully rendered obsolete even before her death in 2001, was instrumental in bringing about legislation against the so-called

VIDEO 451



via: ark4.ny

Fight for Your Life

7
The man in video cover art for
+ at Earl Show in Town

image and on page 234
Images from Fight for Your Life
embracing the drama that unfolds

image and on page 235
More images from Fight for Your Life
advises being turned as the
characters try to free and the police



Fortunately, some of the effort was compensated financially. "After it fell through for me, we sold the script to Paul Williams and Ed Pressman for \$15,000," Endelson also recalls an amusing irony in having made the sale to Williams. "Sometime between 1963-1967 I saw this ten-minute short in a theatre plaza either 'Hooked' or 'The Fisherman' Fade in: Dusk, a fisherman is surfcasting from the beach, gets hungry, finds a sandwich in a bag on the beach, bites into it and a hook goes through his cheek! He grabs the line and is dragged down the beach into the surf flopping like a fish. I think it was made by Paul Williams. "A decade later, the script for *Vigilantes of New York* features "a scene where the vigilantes, with an electric shark rod and reel hook a bad guy who's eating a sandwich at a diner, drag him down the aisle, out the door, down the street to the back of the vigilantes' van where they had a fishing chair mounted. Williams and Pressman read this and had to have the script. It still never got made."

Fight for Your Life

With *Vigilantes of New York* down the tube, Endelson took a sidestep, and came up with the basis of *Fight for Your Life*. "However, we almost never got to see a second Endelson film: "After *Vigilantes* fell through I sort of left the business and got involved with some people who were flying planes, like WWII bombers. I don't want to mention what they occasionally carried on these planes, but I had a very close call! You don't know what paranoia is until you've stayed one night at a friend's house that has \$2,500 of marijuana in the garage. So I walked away from these people and thought, I need to make a film tomorrow - because this is crazy. Okay, what am I gonna do? I've always liked *The Desperate Hours*. I need a film with one location.

something do-able, nothing too big. *The Desperate Hours* takes place in one house. Black films are popular. *Shaft* and *Superfly*. I'm gonna make a black *Desperate Hours*! I went to Mishkin and he loved the idea, he already knew how to sell it. He was just round the corner from 42nd Street, he looks at all the black films with lines outside the theatres and says, 'Yes. There's a market for this.'

A great idea doesn't always lead to a great script, but here fortune arrived in the form of a Mishkin employee called Straw Weisman. Endelson explains: "Straw Weisman worked in Mishkin's office as a film booker, sitting at a little desk in the corner, sending prints on buses to Syracuse and Rochester. He was a clerk, but he'd gone to school to study writing and film, and he says, 'Oh, I can write this film.' So great, there's a free scriptwriter! I said, 'Okay, this is how we're gonna do it.' I gave him the plot summary, and he typed it out and he contributed a lot. I would say 85% of the dialogue is his - heavily edited, mind you, because he has a tendency to ramble, whereas for me everything has to lead to the next thing, to propel you on to the next scene. He didn't know very much about film structure or plot or suspense, so for the structure I had to lead him by the hand, but when it comes to putting dialogue in the actors' mouths, he's brilliant." Between them, the two men forged a no-holds-barred script which fairly leapt out of the typewriter. Endelson's strong concept and structure, plus Weisman's pungent, straight-to-the-point dialogue, delivered an exploitation movie-script to die for almost literally, as it transpired.

But first the movie had to be cast, and with a script so aggressively confrontational it could all have gone horribly wrong: "In those days you put an ad in *Burlesque* because all the actors were out of work. There would be lines outside your office, of actors waiting to audition. And that's how it was with Bill Sanderson, who we cast as Kane. He actually wouldn't leave the office! He says, 'I know I could do this character and I'm not leaving until you give me the part.' And I said, 'Well, I got other people to talk to, so he went outside and sat down in the hallway for several hours until I was finished casting and then he came back in, and he says, 'Well, whuddaya think?' And he was just so intense about it I said, 'Well, sure, you're Kane.' He was from the South, he was educated, he had a law degree, he'd discovered acting, and here was a part with teeth, and he gave it hundred-fifty-thousand percent."

Endelson was on a roll. His project had attracted not only Weisman but also Sanderson, an unknown for sure, but a powerful new screen presence without whom the movie could have disappeared into C-list obscurity. No doubt about it, a bad actor playing Kane would have sunk the project. *Fight for Your Life* balances on a knife-edge of taste and morality, and in the wrong hands it would have been a disaster.

One aspect of the script that addresses black American identity head-on is the focus on the family's Christianity. I asked Endelson if he wished to expose Christianity as a negative influence on black culture. "I'm not a religious person, I don't believe in organised religion. I think organised religion is one of the worst things that's ever happened to the world. In pagan times it did have its place to somewhat civilise the world and give a set of rules, but it's been so distorted and skewed. My philosophy when it comes to symbolism and messages is, if you want to send a message, send a telegram! Not in my movie! Mishkin or Straw Weisman said, 'Wouldn't it be cool if Kane beat the



...the question for me is: how the hell do I shoot it? That was

ping back and forth. When it's run back at 24

The script was also influenced by Mishkin himself, Nelson explains. "Whether Mishkin would edit certain

it. I will not have Kane make the kid eat from his
bow.

Mishkin's fabled parsimony² also means that corners

...meat's wife's wheelchair and she had ...
...the way we were shooting the scene' He was so clear he

The way to get a film like this made on his budget is to kidnap the cast and crew, so we brought everybody

he gas station plays himself in the movie, but I don't

— "It's a little slow, do you mind if we set up some lights and 'f' you?" [laughs]. We stabbed him with one of these
— "table knives and I said, 'As soon as you fall to hi
— "ing you gotta twitch. I think I might even have shot

and you see the big piece of wax sticking out his back

As the baby, comes up into the camera frame and
ed it was empty. I shot it because I knew

Stray: Unknown

1. The first part of the document is a list of references. The references are:

- 1. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 2. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 3. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 4. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 5. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 6. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 7. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 8. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 9. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.
- 10. J. H. Van Veen, "Acoustic beamforming", in *Handbook of Acoustics*, J. H. Van Veen, Ed., CRC Press, 1997, pp. 1-10.

job I could find. Within six months I saw an ad in the *New York Times* for a film producer. A

leaving the fifth round the country, checking the box-office statements, and making

little offices and a little lobby on lower. The day I got home I was asked to

1. $\frac{1}{x^2} = x^{-2}$
 $\frac{d}{dx} x^{-2} = -2x^{-3} = -\frac{2}{x^3}$

work, he would create something that would play for a year in Times Square, 42nd Street, New York! With

1. 在 1949 年 10 月 1 日，中华人民共和国宣告成立，这是中国历史上一个伟大的转折点。

1. The first step is to identify the problem or question that needs to be answered. This involves understanding the context and the specific requirements of the task.

exactly what I wanted. You asked how many setups we got through – well, I went through the old shooting schedule and I counted, in one day, forty-seven setups.”

The first day's shooting began with the scene where two boys, Floyd and Joey, black and white, perform a blood-brother ritual in the woods behind Floyd's house. “Joey was such a flat actor I was ready to kill myself,” shudders Endelson. After that day I just said to myself, Just the can and don't worry about it. Basically, we shot outside at first because the prop people were propping the house with all the black family's paraphernalia, the pictures of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

If you've ever noticed just how swiftly and confidently *Fight for Your Life* is paced, it's fascinating to hear how precise it all was during the shooting: “Everything was virtually one take. I had been a film editor on documentaries after I'd done television commercials, so I knew exactly how I was going to put everything together. And I was on a Mishkin budget so I had no choice but to shoot virtually everything in one take. What you got was what you got. For one night, we rented a room and did a read-through, only one night, so there was no real rehearsal – apart from one other night where I had everybody come over to my tiny apartment and we had a few drinks and talked about what we were going to do.

One of the film's meatiest roles is that of Ted Turner, father of the household, played with great commitment by Bob Judd. Endelson rates his black leading man very highly: “I was blessed to have Bob Judd, who was a Broadway actor. A bit of a bourbon drinker and he was happy! Then he would come in front of the camera, do his line, and retreat to the upstairs of the house – which we never showed because it's where we had the make-up and where everyone hung out. We called him One-Take Judd; every take was virtually perfect. I wish I could have done a second take when he had Chino at the mirror by the front door, because I wanted to see him on both sides of the mirror. That mirror just happened to be there and I used it in order to entrap Chino on both sides. For a while he did hit the mark and we see him on both sides, by the door – but it wasn't perfect. Any other film would have just shot it again so he was in the proper place but I didn't have the luxury. The black daughter [Yvonne Ross] and the white girl [Bonnie Martin] were the flattest. The white girl was picked because Mishkin needed a blonde with tits for advertising. That's why, during the chase scene she's running with her tits hanging out, chased by Ling – that was a shot for the trailer! You have to make compromises. I mean, I don't hold myself up as a cinematic artist beyond story and plot and making something that gets under the skin of the audience. Watching it again this morning, it reminded me just how much a morose I had to go back and dub later. 3-4-inch video had just come out and I put the film on video, and I would have the actors come up to my apartment one at a time and I would re-record them over the second track on the video – it had two tracks. I would play the original track and they would talk into the microphone in order to dub. This is like the poorest man's dubbing studio you can possibly imagine. And then I would have that track transferred over to film (we shot on 35mm but edited on 16mm workprint to save money). It works because I'm a perfectionist, I synched it all up afterwards by hand. The worst thing in low-budget film is lousy sound.”

When I ask Endelson to describe his own directorial style he laughs: “Basically, I direct like Hitler! They actually called me that. I'm very ‘Achtung’ – this is how it's going to be done!” No discussion. It's very much the Hitchcockian approach: the actors are puppets, the crew are there to help you record it, and it's my way or the highway. There's no time to discuss character or motivation. All that there is time to discuss is how to get the actors into the mood for a scene. There are various psychological, manipulative ways – you have to be a psychiatrist. I held such a tight rein on everything. I was the first to arrive on location in the morning and the last to leave at night. It's the X-factor: either you have it or you don't. A good director knows how to help and inspire the actor to hit the mark that you're looking for, either physically or in his expression. When Kane is first in the living room and he steps on a table – I told him to do it. It's so intimidating, to step on someone else's furniture! He crosses over and says, ‘Any of you coons wanna tie the feedbag on?’ And then puts the gun to the nose of the daughter, and little Reggie is sitting there during this whole thing – you look at Reggie during this scene and he is truly terrified! His father was there, though. He came to the casting call, his father or his mother brought him. He wanted to be an actor and he walked away from this movie, I assume, profoundly affected, because he went on to become a writer.

Endelson continues, “Only once did anyone have tantrums. It was Chino, when it came to shooting him in the balls. I wanted him rigged so that when the squib exploded in his pants – I had a special guy come in and do this – had him rigged with foam rubber over the back of his legs and back and neck, and roped to a pulley so that we could pull him and explode his crotch at the same time. I could only do one take. And he says, ‘No, you do it and I'll jump.’ And I said, ‘No. If it never works, we could never explode it and you jump at the right time. There was a big row but finally he submitted to having this thing rigged up around him, we pulled, and it worked very well. But that was the worst.

Endelson is in no doubt that the cast saw the movie in a positive light. They thought this was an important movie that needed to be made, because it shows how terrible racism is. That's why they worked for almost no money. Endelson got \$1,000 to do the film, and he was the highest paid. Grandma and some of the others probably got around \$500 for all of this time, plus hotel and meals. They certainly didn't do it for the money. They did it because they felt it was an important film to be made, and that's why they got into it so much. They had all read the script, we had no revolts, no arguments on the set.

Throughout the remainder of 1977, Endelson worked post-production. Thanks to the very tight shooting ratio, the movie was impossible for anyone else to recut. “Mishkin saw it when it was finished. There was so blue material, there was no question of ‘Make this shorter, or this – change this, change that,’ because what you saw was what you got. The cut was done fairly quickly but then I spent a lot of time on the sound: the breaking of glass, the swigging from bottles, the footsteps, the running of the dog in the woods, in order to give the sound real depth. I spent a tremendous amount of time doing this. It's what brings a film alive. Even the creaking of the floor as someone walks. I collected most of my own sounds – we would punch water-melons and record them! I moved the editing equipment into my apartment. The Steinbecker was under my coffee-bed, and I spent twelve hours a day putting together all these snippets of film and sound.

Public Screening and Sales

howed it to an unsuspecting black audience who went
k... ..
k... ..
L... .. I... ..
H... ..
K... ..
sell to the audience and say [H]. I'm the director, what
k... ..
Fant for Your Life has become a must-see item for
k... ..
k... ..

[illegible]

Journey East

[illegible]

On Writing of the Mishnah

all people are screaming and running and pointing, and then all of a sudden they stop. And that was my first contribution to *Slaves* was

~~Handwritten notes, mostly illegible due to blurring.~~

[illegible]

On the Move **2007**

THAKOS: And he's like this Tennessee drawl. "Hi I'm Bill Sanderson, an' I'm here to read for you."

IN THE SCENE AND BE SET AND BE INVOLVED

KANO: We looked at each other, and the guy, it was hell.

Bob should have stayed in the business. He had great potential.

and that's justice. If you go back to the Holocaust

The Living Dead at the All-Night Mall

Willard Huyck & Gloria Katz on the making of *Messiah of Evil*

contributions from ed for Morgan Fisher and designer Joan Mocini

Messiah of Evil (1973)

Messiah of Evil was my view of the San Fernando valley . That bleak high street? If you walk through San Fernando valley at night, that's what you saw.

Willard Huyck

A pretentious horror cheapie which wastes its atmospheric camerawork in telling a badly plotted story about cannibalistic zombies. [] Scott Conrad's editing includes too many shots of clouds." *Kurten*

A strangely surreal movie, shot through with the pretensions one might expect from fresh film school graduates but rich in narrative convolutions and peculiar atmospherics." *Kim Newman, Nightmare Movies*

True horror fanatics love to ferret out morbid treasures from the undergrowth of low-budget production, but sometimes you wonder if you're beginning to prefer the taste of junk to the occasional truffle. Fortunately, neglected marvels like *Messiah of Evil* vindicates your persistence. Stephen King writes eloquently about the "horror fan's taste for 'prospecting' in his non-fiction book *Dance Macabre*, citing David Schmoedler's *Tourist Trap* as an example of why we should continue to sift the genre for gems. If you're asking me to illustrate the point of it all, I would choose George Barry's *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats*, Daniel DiSanto's *Victims* and Willard Huyck's *Messiah of Evil*. The latter is hardly the most obscure film in this book, but it has never really enjoyed the acclaim it deserves, a shame, as were it not for a tiresome theme song imposed on the material by the producers, and an unnecessary voice-over. I would place it alongside John Hancock's *Let's Scare Jessica To Death* as one of the most unfairly neglected horror films of the 1970s.

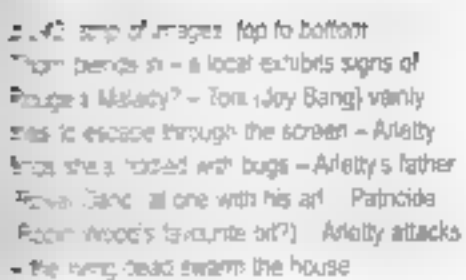
Arietty (Marionna Hill), a young woman who has recently lost touch with her artist father Joseph Lang (Royal Dano), sets out to visit him at his studio in a small town called Point Dune, on the California coast. Just

outside town she speaks to an all-night garage worker who seems spooked for no apparent reason. He urges her to turn back. Continuing to Point Dune, Arietty can find no trace of her father, though his studio-cum-home has clearly been lived in recently. She reads his rambling diary entries but learns little of any use, and so drives into town to investigate. The snooty owner of a local art gallery (Morgan Fisher) directs her to a motel, where Thom (Michael Greer), a playboy adventurer interested in her father's paintings, is staying with his two female companions, Laura (Annua Ford) and Toni (Joy Bang). Arietty finds Thom tape-recording an interview with Charlie (Elijah Cook Jr.), an old vagrant who describes a sinister local legend concerning 'the blood moon'. Leaving the motel, Arietty is accosted by Charlie, who grows agitated and tells her that she must burn – not bury – her father. The following day, back at her father's studio, Arietty awakens to find Thom, Laura and Toni settling in. Thom explains they've been thrown out of the motel and mentions that Charlie has been murdered. Arietty succumbs, through fear and loneliness, to Thom's sexual advances, a development that causes first Laura then Toni to leave and head off into town – a decision they both come to regret. Laura discovers the town's terrible secret in a late-night supermarket, while for Toni, a trip to the cinema becomes a nightmare. The next day, Arietty is culled to the beach and is told her father has been found dead, crushed beneath a sculpture he was building. Arietty tells Thom the body was not her father's. Meanwhile she is beginning to show symptoms of a strange sickness afflicting the townspeople. At last her father returns home, warning his daughter of danger – then he attacks her. Arietty stabs him and, remembering Charlie's words, sets him on fire. Thom witnesses horrific scenes during a night-time walk through town and returns for Arietty – but there can be no sanctuary for either of them.

Messiah of Evil is a very strange, very innovative spin on the zombie film. Like Robert Voskanian's *The Child* and the aforementioned *Let's Scare Jessica To Death*, it

The US one-sheet for *Messiah of Evil*





James Robinson - do not cold-call this man.



achieves much in an over-subscribed subgenre by setting out in an altogether different direction, before taking a metaphorical turn through the cemetery.

Now, for purists out there I have to qualify this statement: these are not the classic flesh-eating ghoul-spawn of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. *Messianah of Evil* was made soon enough after that seminal classic not to have the weight of formula on its shoulders. Huyck and Katz take the blank, hollow-eyed silence of the Romero zombies, and their taste for flesh (in this case both dead animal and living human), but instead of repeating Romero's explanations they dispense with them, leaving the ontological status of these beings largely unspecified. Are they really 'dead people', as one release title suggests? Or are they under some sort of mesmeric influence, mindless acolytes of the mysterious 'dark stranger' referred to in Lang's rambling diaries? When Thom witnesses attacks against the police, it seems that bullets have no effect on the advancing hordes. But the reactions seem less random than the brain-dead shambling we usually associate with zombies. The story also mentions disease - the signs of which are a numbness of the extremities and trickles of blood from eyes and ears, not unlike the signs of Rouge's Malady in David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (1970), or the slowly encroaching signs of death in Dan O'Bannon's *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985). Are the numb yet murderous townspeople simply infected with a malignant virus?

So these are not your typical zombies. Their behaviour is governed by Huyck and Katz's desire to populate a particularly nightmarish vision of sterile Californian consumerism with symbols of soulless humanity. In this it's actually a forerunner of Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*: one scene in particular in which Laura discovers a pack of dishevelled-looking 'shoppers' gathered round a supermarket freezer unit munching cuts of raw meat, is both a pure nightmare image and a symbol of slavery-to-consumption as effective as any in *Dawn*.

The other standout scene is Thom's trip to the cinema, a paranoid nightmare that Alfred Hitchcock would surely have loved (especially since it quotes a standout scene from *The Birds*). Like much of the film, it achieves an oscillation between the mundane and the macabre that writers of American dark fantasy like Dennis Etchison and Peter Straub would go on to explore in literature. *Messianah* accomplishes this under considerable negative pressure: for instance, Huyck never had the chance to finalize which film the zombies are 'watching' in the cinema - it was added by the producers after he and Katz were ousted from the project. In the film as released, a cinema sign announces 'Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye', although what we actually see is a confusing montage of Wild West clips culled from Bernard (A Name for Evil) Garcia's *Gone with the West*, a troubled production starring Sammy Davis Jr. that languished unfinished for several years. *Gone with the West* was owned at the time by International Cinefilm, who were responsible for finishing *Messianah* without consulting Huyck and Katz (presumably they wanted to get at least some use from the Garcia footage). The whole disorienting mess is cut out of sequence, and scored to music more typical of a blaxploitation B-movie: the result is a garbled, senseless entertainment which the slowly gathering audience of 'dead people' stare at with dull-eyed disinterest. Yet despite the odds, someone, somewhere, chose well - while the scene may lack Huyck's

brushstrokes, it conveys a frantic, affectless confusion that feels entirely right. If you remade *Messianah* today, some randomly edited Michael Bay footage would no doubt do the trick.

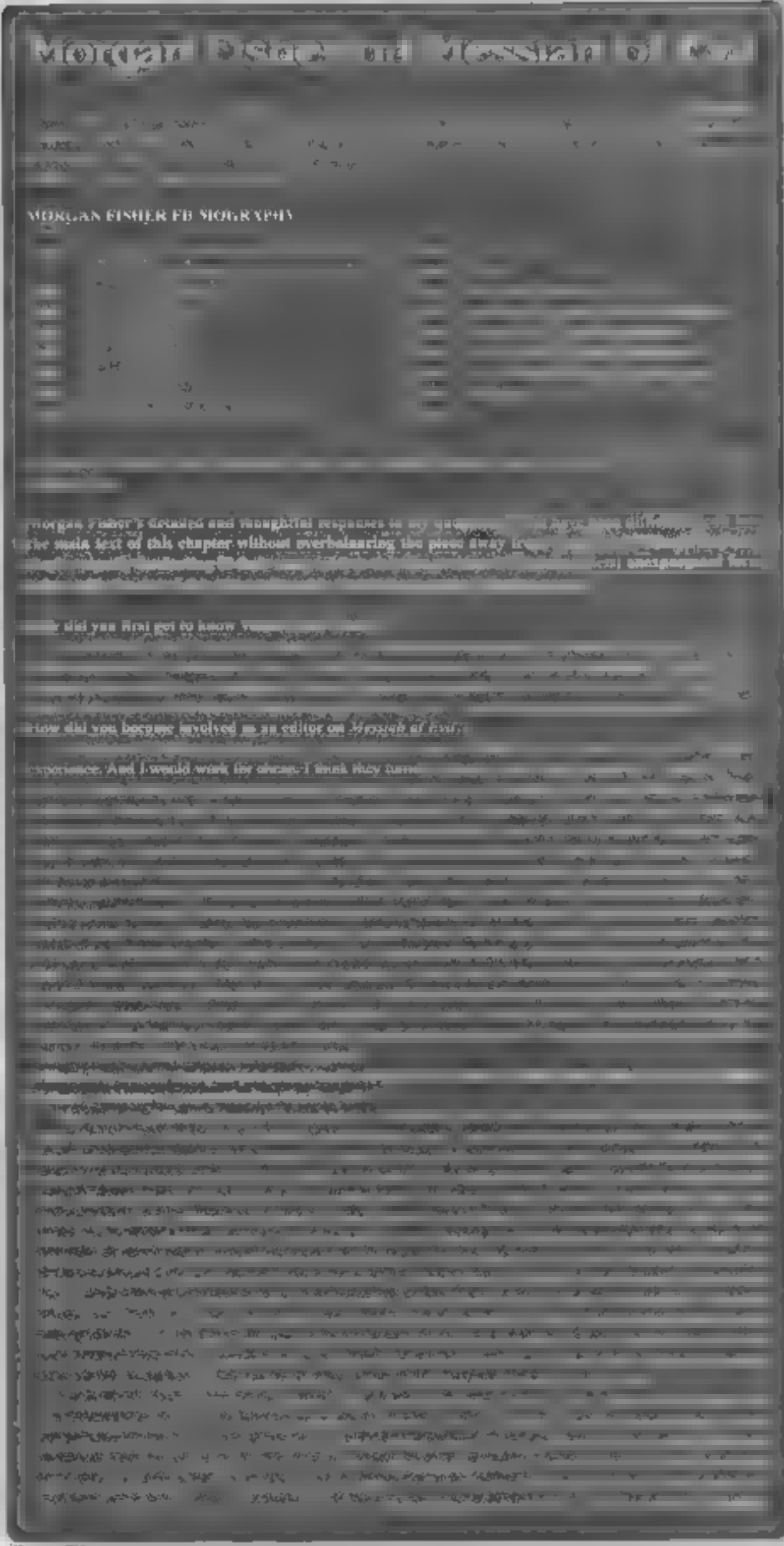
Overall, this is an accomplished movie in which style and theme dovetail beautifully. The way in which the cinematography and art direction align the puzzled, increasingly spooked Arletty with the looming, alienated figures in her father's paintings is especially striking. Her father's home seems actually *built* from art, of a chillingly forbidding variety: the rooms have become giant canvasses, with wall-paintings depicting stylised, near-characterless figures staring blankly from collisions of geometric planes and disappearing perspectives. The effect is of the ominous dark-coated men of René Magritte's paintings invading the post-*Yellow Submarine* psychedelic poster art of the late sixties. Arletty is almost lost in her father's graphic domain - which could perhaps be seen as a reproach to artistic parents who neglect the more essential creation of their children.

With its heavy emphasis on design, *Messianah of Evil* reminds me of the extravagant Italian horrors of Dario Argento. The use of painting to destabilise the film frame is particularly clever and shows the hand of a director unafraid to play with the medium in a way that's rare for the more pragmatic, commercial American horror film. And there's a scene where Arletty's father covers his face with handfuls of blue paint before screaming and attacking his daughter that wouldn't be out of place in Argento's (much later) film *The Stendhal Syndrome*.

By the time the 'zombie' secret is out, the viewer has already been rattled by the film's paranoid perceptions. Brutal murder tv seems to vibrate with a danger that may be imaginary, or all-too-real. Huyck turns the late-night car parks and shopping malls of the San Fernando valley into a hyper-real nightmare, where horror lurks in multiple window displays, endless store fronts, row upon row of parked cars. He captures a sense of unease that you sometimes get in our mechanised society when the fever of daily traffic is subdued by nightfall. If you've ever hitchhiked and found yourself stuck for hours beside motorway slip roads near industrial estates, with their giant arc-lit loading bays, you'll have some idea of the picture I'm trying to draw - inhuman, hostile places, emerging after dark from behind the façade of banality. The lighting by Gloria's brother Stephen Katz (a talented cinematographer later responsible for *Gods and Monsters*) brings that hard-edged *frigidité* ambience in from the periphery and onto the city streets, turning unremarkable shopping areas into glittering consumerist cemeteries. 'If the cities of the world were destroyed tomorrow, they would all be rebuilt to look like Point Dume,' says (Rova Dano's) voice-over. 'Entirely normal. Quiet. Silent though because of the shared horror. I know, it's hiding now beneath the sunned skin.'

Another indication that the filmmakers are aiming high is the constant attention given to sound. Once you get past the excruciatingly histrionic title song ('Hold On to Love' sung by minor folk artist Raun Mackinnon), Huyck treats sound-mixing as another field of creativity instead of a simple matter of matching Foley and dialogue. The pulse of the sea maintains a constant level of unease, over which an effective, if at times rather strident electronic score adds an array of ring-modulated effusions. (Philan Bishop's weirdy electronics can also

he heard on *Ass of the Tarentula* and *The S-*
 ee review section) How it is this skill in archi-
 rating sound and vision that makes Arletty's voice-over
 regrettable. It would be a service to cinema if her
 intrusive internal monologues were erased one day. Like
 the unnecessary Marlowise once given to Harrison
 Ford's Deckard in *Bleed Runner*. On the other hand, the
 up to mind the books of J. P. Lovecraft (whose
 agonists frequently left their disturbed rambling
 laries for others to find), fostering the idea that this is
 if you Lovecraftian horror film filtered through
 contemporary fears about loss of identity
 juxtaposed with the conformity of the ghoul
 nspeople is the central character of Thom. He's a
 andy and a dropout, probably a rich kid burning
 inasies of alienation and freedom while waiting for his
 parents to leave him the estate. In keeping with the times
 third. However
 reached to the depiction of
 modern bedroom arrangement. I'd suggest a para-
 in the cynical viewpoint of Lucio Fulci's thrillers
 liter. We are clearly dealing with the fallout of the sixties
 the brainish Toni, the sophisticated but possessive Laura
 the dilettantish, emotional & manipulative Thom.
 There's the feeling that some kind of socio-cultural bomb
 dropped, but instead of liberation and revolution, a
 sort of *laissez-faire* fatalism has descended, perhaps the
 true full-out of the nuclear age. A languid quality soak
 in the sun, echoing the coastal setting and the
 naless lapping of the waves. It's a shade short of preten-
 as in this respect, employing measured performance
 and dreamlike pacing, Huyek manages by the skin of his
 into the portentous-
 m reminded very strongly of the mood of Peter Fonda
Transfer also released in 1973, in which hippie
 decisiveness was counterpointed by reckless science
 There are loose ends and confusing issues still
 unresolved at the end. How is the blood affliction passed
 on? What is the nature of the seashore ritual? Who is the
 ark figure seen embracing his mindless followers
 Doubtless much of the confusion stems from the
 unhappy truncated involvement of Huyek and Katz. Still
Evil some unforgettable, truly disturbing
 s. The theme of social alienation is cream
 iced up at the bodily level. Arietty sticks a needle
 into her leg and turns her hand on a gas stove, yet feels
 neither repellent scene she vomits beetle
 and a small lizard into the sink. Bernie Robinson
 jumps up in to
 to guarantee sleepless nights in the nervous
 Peter Medak's *The C-*
 work of people with an appreciation
 s nightmare when someone not gene-
 their work in the horror field 'has a goal at scaring
 Kubrick set the benchmark with *The Shining*. Huyek
 Katz, who wrote this as a time-out from the screenplay for
 pand a genre's horizons. *Messtah of Evil* has first film
 clip but fantasize what would have happened if it had





Howard Huxley and Gloria Katz are the international renowned writers of *American Graffiti* (1973), a bittersweet tale of small-town American life in the early sixties, described by the US critic Roger Ebert as, "not only a great movie but a brilliant piece of historical fiction." It won many more such plaudits, did spectacular box-office business, and launched the commercial career of its director, George Lucas. When Lucas later ran into difficulties writing a sci-fi flick called *Star Wars* (1977) Huxley performed what has to be one of the most wisely accepted "uncredited rewrites" in cinema history, injecting more humour into the script and earning himself points on the most lucrative and influential film of the century. In the '80s, Huxley and Katz wrote *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) for Lucas and director Steven Spielberg. The film was criticized at the time for being too bloodthirsty, although it's not a complaint you'll hear from many children. Once again, the writers helped to create a massive commercial smash. However, trouble was waiting in the wings, after a poorly-received comedy called *Best Defense* (1984), which the couple wrote and Huxley directed, their working partnership with Lucas finally hit the rocks with *Howard the Duck* (1986), a resounding flop. Critics ritualistically mutilated Huxley and Katz plucking out their hearts and lowering them into a pool of molten lava – metaphorically speaking, of course. *Howard the Duck* later received a Razzie for Worst Film of the Decade, putting it in the illustrious company of *Can't Stop the Music* and *Showgirls*, which must be some consolation but the full-scale adulation that followed proved hard to overcome and since 1994's *Radland Murders* (the names of Howard Huxley and Gloria Katz have been absent from the screen).

But there is one more film of which they can be proud. At the back of the cupboard, so to speak, almost hidden behind the couple's extraordinary A-list adventures, there lies a strange, rarely-screened low-budget horror film *Messiah of Evil*, made right at the outset of their careers. It was initially written to be sold to another director, but when deals fell through Huxley and Katz decided to direct it themselves. At the time, *Messiah of Evil* did them few favours in the industry but over the years a few attentive critics and fans attuned to the film's icy mood have championed it as one of the most unsettling of the 1970s.

The Team

"We both grew up in Los Angeles," Huxley begins. "I grew up in the San Fernando valley. When I was a kid we used to play out in the ranches out there in the West Valley, the Warner Brothers ranch where they shot movies. So I was interested from then. And then I was interested in journalism and went to USC, ostensibly as a journalism major, and then didn't tell my parents and switched over to film. In those days being a film major was easy. I mean you walked by the film department and they asked you if you wanted to be a major. Now it's incredibly difficult. It was there I met George Lucas. We were in the same class.

"There were very few people in the film department," recalls Katz. "I was a history graduate student and was overloaded with astronomical amounts of work. This friend of mine just a ways seemed to be having such a good time because he went to so many movies all the time, and I asked him what was he majoring in. I wanted to do whatever he was doing!"

Huxley and Katz have been together as a couple and as creative collaborators, for forty years. They first met in 1960 thanks to a shared interest in the work of Roger Corman. "A mutual friend said that Corman, who was of course a god at that time, was going to be showing a first cut of *The Wild Angels* at UCLA," Huxley remembers, "so I drove to UCLA and he introduced me to Gloria. I sat next to her and she had just come back from Europe and was wearing the first miniskirt I had ever seen. It was great. We went downtown, in L.A. in those days they used to show three films for a dollar at those beautiful Art Deco theatres like the Mayan Theatre downtown. We went to see this weird double bill – *Rio Bravo* and *Chiefen Girls*!"

Huxley's social life was steeped in film, and it was only a matter of time before he began making as well as watching movies. He first teamed up together with his old room mate at college, Curtis Hanson, who also went on to make movies, including the consummate neo-noir *L.A. Confidential* and made an hour-long film, in 'Straight-8' format. "Our parents financed it and they had to pay to shoot it," he laughs. "It was a very odd experimental film. It had war themes and a forties star chase and car chases. We both had thirties cars so we used our cars prominently and had a whole gangster movie section. I spent my junior year abroad in Paris and went to the cinémathèques every day. When I got back to Los Angeles, Curtis was editing *Cinema* magazine, which his uncle ran. Someone called to say they needed a reader at AIP studios. So I became AIP producer, Larry Gordon's reader. That involved looking over scripts and writing synopses. Gloria was editing at the time and she would help me write the synopses. I told Larry that I could write as well as the people he was hiring. So he said, well there was a film that needed more work. I had gone to school with John Milus, so I said John and I could rewrite it. So our first screen credit was something called *The Devil's 8* (1969). And then Gloria was writing a script with her friend and the friend bailed out on her, so she and I finished that script and just kept the collaboration going.

Katz meanwhile had made a splash at UCLA with a stop-motion movie called *A Day with Barbie and Ken* was an exploration of the sex lives of the iconic Barbie dolls," she laughs, "That sort of made my career at UCLA film school. It enabled me to go forward in all these various projects, which doesn't seem like a big thing until you realise that Paul Schrader was also parallel to me in class. Flunked out and wasn't allowed to continue. Adds Huxley "Paul was seen in the halls crying and trying to get people to sign a petition so he could get back into film school." Remarks Katz "UCLA had more taste than the rest of the world." Another of Katz's student films was a split screen "happening" called *The Brute Stripped Bare by Her Sutures*. "I got into a lot of trouble with that at UCLA cos there was nudity and so it was heavily censored.

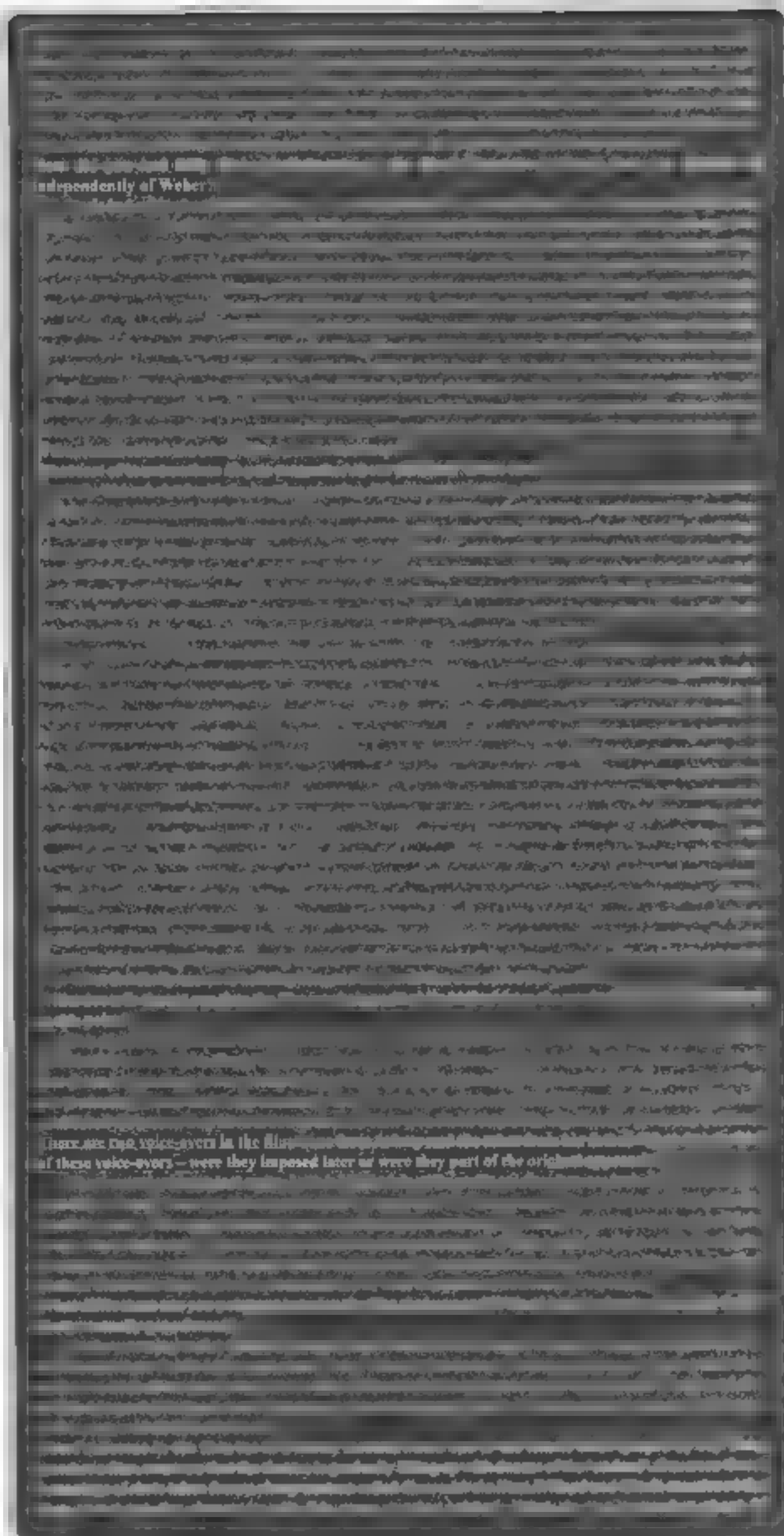
Katz's friend Joan Marne, who would later work on the art design of *Messiah of Evil*, remembers, "Gloria and I and another woman shared a house near campus. Gloria hadn't gotten interested in film yet. She was taking lots of

rent classes and floundering a bit. I was an art major and so was our other roommate. I really started painting a lot in my last year. I moved up to Berkeley with my friend, Arthur, and Gloria stayed in L.A. and went to art school. We stayed in touch. Arthur and I moved back and forth from Berkeley three times from 1965 to 1977. I had a Gloria's Barbie and Ken shorts and another one with an orange moving around, but it's hazy after all these years.

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in 1968. Huyek, now a regular script-reader at AIP, found herself involved in reworking a film that was to become a horror landmark: Michael Reeves's *Witchfinder General* (1968). "AIP had all the Edgar Allan Poe stories that they would just put on, you know, any film. This one came out as *The Executioners* when I was working on it. I remember I did a lot of laughs. "But there's a very funny story. While I was there I worked my way up from reader to Larry Gordon, who later became a producer at Twentieth Century-Fox, to his assistant. We got a message from an agent at William Morris that John Eider, who had written a lot of the Hammer Horror films, was in Los Angeles looking for work. So I of course got John Eider's credits together for Larry, and John came in and he was a young guy and, you know, I spent a lot of time talking to him. God it must be wonderful working for Hammer and so forth, him having done all these films. And he said, 'We had him write a treatment for *The Conqueror*' and I was the first one to read it. Larry called and said, 'Did you read the treatment over the weekend?' I said, 'Yeah. It was awful. It's just terrible.' Larry said, 'The guy can't be that bad - just look at his credits.' So I gave it to him and he said, 'You're right. It's just terrible.' Then we all call Larry says, 'You won't believe this. I just got a call from Fred Gwynne, the guy in *The Munsters*. Somehow Fred Gwynne had some kind of weird relationship with John Eider - it's a formula - and they had a spat or something and he ended on him. What had happened was that John Eider had the name Hammer put on all their horror films. It's a company name. So what we found out was that this guy had maybe done one little thing at Hammer and had not any of these films that he gave as his credits. So Larry said, 'He's coming in today and you've got to see him while I talk to the lawyer.' So I sat with this guy who was pretending to be John Eider, who was getting nervous. I asked him more questions like 'What is it like on the set of...?' Eventually he was called by Mrs. and Sam Arkoff, who was the head of AIP, told them they were going to sue him unless he gave a million back. But he didn't.

For John Eider the game was up, but Huyek also decided to bring in real talent, encouraging his bosses to take on Maerke, as she explains. "Willard got me a job at AIP reading scripts. This was in addition to a full-time job at a machine elementary school. I was working about fifty hours a week. I'd pick up the scripts on my way home from school, read the synopsis at night, teach and then drop them in the morning. Later AIP gave me the job of looking for movie scripts, but it was very unrewarding because they always said, 'This is a good script, but it's better suited for television.' They used to say that all the time."



Messiah Conception

"We wrote *Messiah of Evil* for six weeks in 1971, not long before we shot the movie," Huyek begins. "We had just finished working on the treatment for *American Graffiti*. Our young agent had quit being an agent to become a movie mogul and said he could raise \$100,000 for us to make our first movie. A group of private investors in Texas had been convinced to put up money for a 'commercial genre movie' and they decided that I just loved horror films. It wasn't like we had to satisfy a studio or anything, we just finished the script and showed them and they said, 'Yeah, it seems like a horror film.'"

Two companies are credited for production on *Messiah of Evil*: International Cine Film Corp. and V/M Productions. "I have no idea who those people are," says Huyek. "The Texas investors actually made another film called *Summer Run*, a film by Leon Capetanos, and they raised the money for that too. They ended up making his film, which was about teenagers in Europe, and our film before they went out of business." The film was supposed to have been budgeted at \$100,000 but only \$85,000 ever showed up, Huyek explains. We later learned that the friends of the investors had skimmed \$15,000 of the money to re-roof their houses. So, we tried to make the film for \$85,000.

Messiah of Evil takes place in a modern-day California setting of strip-mall superstores and modernist architecture, but it catches something quite unexpected given such a setting, as it radiates the chill influence of Rhode Island horror specialist H.P. Lovecraft. "Curtis Hanson and I used to spend a lot of time in second-hand book stores in L.A.," Huyek recalls. "There was this great place called Acres Books on Long Beach. We came across a lot of horror books and Lovecraft was somebody you read if you were into that area." Gloria Katz also enjoyed Lovecraft's tales: "If you're at all familiar with the genre, it's like reading Edgar Allan Poe," she says.

He gives you that sense of doom and perversity." With Curtis Hanson fresh from scripting AIP's own Lovecraft adaptation *The Dunwich Horror*, there was clearly a whiff of Cthulhu in the breeze. Interestingly though, while *The Dunwich Horror* is based on an actual Lovecraft tale, it deviates wildly from the source material and misses the Lovecraftian essence by a mile. Huyek and Katz, on the other hand, were not adapting Lovecraft directly, but they nonetheless forged a script with sympathetic resonance to the Master of Cosmic Dread.

There still remained the question of what to call the film. Huyek recalls, "We had originally planned for the film to be called *Blood Virgin*, but we couldn't get actors to audition because they considered the title 'cheesy.' So we came up with what we thought was a much classier title: *The Second Coming*. But actors still wouldn't audition, thinking it was a porno film."

Designing Dead People

Filming took place in the summer of 1971, mostly in Echo Park and other cheap areas of Los Angeles. Among the first aspects of the film to require attention were the murals and paintings which adorned the central interior location of the film, the house-cum-studio belonging to

Arletty's father. "The paintings in the film were done by Joan Moeine," says Huyek. "They were painted directly on the walls of our rented location and therefore lost to posterity."

Moeine recalls: "The summer of '71 I was house-sitting in L.A. at Dyanne Axelson's house, who was in the movie and had a chewing-the-scenery part, and Gloria and Willard were filming *Messiah* nearby in an old mansion above Echo Park. They were working from a script I'd written together to start filming, and they asked if I'd help out. I said okay. Jack Fisk had been working for some time on the set and we began painting the murals inside the big old house. The ceilings were extremely high as you can see, especially in the escalator mural. I can't remember who thought of what, but Jack at least at first was making all the decisions. Gloria and Willard were worried that Jack was going to make the place look too 'horror-filmy', and thought I might have ideas to make it more subtle. I don't remember anything about how I was supposed to do that, but I think they were mostly having first film jitters and wanted me around to bounce ideas off of."

I comment to Gloria Katz on how the film frequently blurs the visual relationship between three-dimensional characters and two-dimensional backdrops. "That was the idea," she agrees, and Huyek adds, "Actually when we were doing *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* that's how we came up with the idea for a scene where the Thuggee comes out of a wall painting in the palace."

I asked Moeine if she recalled what the script required of the artworks. Were there specific written demands, or was she given a free hand? "I remember that they wanted the murals to reflect his [Arletty's father's] morphing into *One of Them*" and to project an empty feeling, one of slight dread without any real violence. Gloria and Willard had a very clear picture of what they wanted. We worked inside the house, which contained one of the sets, using ladders and scaffolding. We also painted a bathroom with murals, which was really difficult because it was a small room, so it was hard to move around. I worked on all the murals and I'm a movie star. I painted the whole mural in the bathroom."

Moeine followed her suit on *Messiah of Evil* with a gig as designer for one of the most perversely beautiful films of the seventies: Terrence Malick's *Badlands*. So did *Messiah of Evil* play a part in landing her this iconic assignment? "Yes. I think that Jack Fisk recommended me to Terry Malick. I know I flew down to L.A. to meet with him. I brought a bunch of photos of my work on *Messiah* and he was very polite but said he was looking for somebody who could paint a folk-art type billboard and that these works were too realistic. I had a so-called brought along a bunch of photos of my own work which at that time was 'if I may say so' whimsical. He loved it and hired me right then. I painted the large billboard that was supposed to be done by Warren Oates playing Sissy Spacek's father. There was a big scene at the billboard, when Martin Sheen first confronts Oates and Oates tells him to get lost. After the film was shot, Terry asked if I wanted them to bring the billboard back with them so I could have it. I had no place to store it or display it and I thought it'd be a neat idea to leave it on the Colorado plains outside of La Junta where the film was shot. I wish I'd gone to visit. It must be long gone."



supposed to be very very spectacular. That was never shot. Obviously we had a much different idea for what they were watching, but that never got shot," Huyck adds. "And we never really shot the movie the way they were watching, the way we really wanted to shoot it. When we were cutting the film, only because one of our editors found it in the trash bin, what they were watching in the theatre, for our purposes of trying to sell it, was a little *Stanley*. It looked great. Because it was the original, it had beautiful colour."

Huyck continues, "We actually took the work print at one point and were editing it in hiding. We had to sneak the workprint out of Technicolor, who had been very nice to because they were happy to have somebody use their unappreciated Techniscope lab equipment, which they sold to China after we finished our film. Another consequence was that we got a frantic phone call from Michael Greer one night: he'd been arrested in Hollywood by two disgruntled cops who had worked doing traffic control on our film. The cops demanded their money before they'd let Michael out of jail. The two cops ended up being the only people ever fully paid. A lot of people were promised that when the film was sold they would get some money. They didn't realise that it was taken away rather than sold."

Body-Snatchers

As Huyck explains, their troubles were far from over once the film was in the can: "We then tried to sell it, but were unsuccessful. Our new agent Jeffrey Berg (who later became the CEO of ICM³) told us to quit screening it for people because it was ruining our careers!" "Because the response was so bad," adds Katz.

Huyck continues, "Eventually a group of young investors sued the executive producers, and one day we sadly watched our workprint and outtakes driven off in a Haul. People we never met did some recutting, scored and finally released the movie – several times under different titles. Somebody finally released it under the title *Dead People*, which led to two interesting footnotes. In *4mm*, *Huff* Woody Allen shows a montage of 'sucky Los Angeles' that includes a shot of *Dead People* on a drive-in marquee. The second footnote was that one day my poor dad (Walter Huyck, Sr.) was served a court summons stating that he was being sued by George Romero for title infringement.⁴ I don't know who came up with *Messiah of Evil*, but it is catchy. There was a law suit and the investors finally got their rights back from the money-raising young guys we dealt with, and they gave it to some production company in Hollywood to finish it. There's a guy named Scott Conrad on it as editor. He was not our editor." "Actually he's not a bad editor," Katz interjects. "We could have done so much worse than Scott. At least he was a real editor!"⁵

Our editor was a guy named Billy Weber," Huyck continues, "who went on to become very successful."⁶ The other editor was somebody we went to film school with, an experimental filmmaker named Morgan Fisher. He was sort of our group intellectual, but he loved the movie, so he was the other editor. Morgan made a film called *Phi Phenomenon*, which was famous because it was one camera on ten minutes of a clock and he was trying to show that you couldn't really see the clock moving yet it did. But it was hard for him to find a clock that didn't actually tick. He plays the art dealer, *Karl*, in the film – sort of strange looking guy. That's Morgan.

Other essential films by such as Jess Franco
Carnivals, Devil Hunter and Lucio Fulci
American
Huyck's
High School
Ten Violent Women, Ted
party did at least
Deathdream, which was a
in the film

With the budget skimmed of \$15,000, quite a few people were still unpaid by the end of the shoot. For Huyck, this diminishment of funds led to desperate measures: "It was post-production that suffered. We finished shooting, though there were some pick-ups and things that never got shot, and we edited the film and put in a temp track and so forth, and then we just couldn't sell it."

Actually, two sequences were never shot," Katz explains. "We never shot the scene on the beach really the way we wanted to shoot it. You see, the last sequence was



Huyck adds, "I was thinking back on our crew. The artist
Nick Fark" who also did Terry Malick.

The cinematographer, Stephen Katz, is O
lot of movies, including *The*
and *Only and Monsters*." Ciora adds, "The
very, very good and it was a Techniscop
eally real y rich." Huyck continues: "I
version of *Messiah of Evil* you saw
figure of a young man running, who then
slashed by a little girl next to a swimming
ing man was Walter Hill, who went on to
te and direct."

After life

ed with a

fied with a copyright date in 1973. Its tortur
inable ever since. Editor Morgan Fisher t
s "In a poll in *Sight and Sound* or maybe
moment in the late seventies I think at least tw
es placed *Messiah of Evil* on their best films of a
ist." Today, *Messiah of Evil* has lapsed in
curity. "We have no idea who owns the
and we don't have a print of it.
IS released by somebody called Woodhaven
er watched it." One can understand Haven
velance not only was the film situ ly edited without hi
but so far all video versions have left it
red when it comes to picture quality (T
Video Gems NTSC release.)
igan Moline offers her perspective on the
I do remember thinking it was wonderful. It
ortably artsy in others. I don't think the
d n p their minds whether it was a horror movie
in artistic movie that had some horror in it. An example
the lead Arletty (the French actress from
his) I do however agree has
d a feeling of subtle dread, and it looked great
s couldn't sell it we were despondent," Katz
I don't think we showed it to Francis [Ford
J], but George [Lucas] liked the film, so we went
working on *American Graffiti* and then we stopp
pon it. Many years later when they were
vident films from UCLA actually. I ran into

Michael likes to have sex with the lesbian to dominate her.

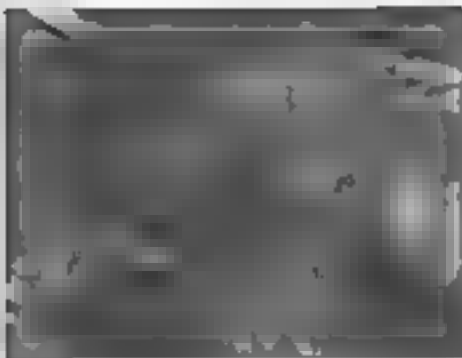


Figure controlling

Robin Wood, the critic. He saw my student, Tim, and really liked it. He said, 'You're Gloria Katz?' Oh, *Messiah of Evil*, the greatest horror film of the seventies. So I reassured the man was a genius!" She laughs, adding "Actually I said, 'What are you talking about?'"

Huyck and Katz are frank and unpretentious when it comes to acknowledging the shortcomings of their debut thanks to them we now know that the film did not reach the screen as it was intended. But while few fans would argue that the final product is perfect, I feel that *Messiah of Evil* survives its flaws and emerges (with a bit of leeway granted for that awful theme song!), as a wonderfully macabre and unnerving experience, with numerous sequences that stand up with the best the genre has to offer.



I can vouch for the fact that this man, like Michael Oser, is always on. But his 'on' is another planet. I called him and had possibly the creepiest telephone conversation of my life. I gave it as an excuse he was unwilling to be interviewed, so I'll say no more, but believe me, he is *not* an scary dude.

The finished version uses a montage from Bernard Girard's *...with the West*, cut together in a surrealistic way. Morgan Fisher, *Messiah*'s editor, also recalls another film being used in the cinema sequence: "The scene that was playing on the screen in the movie theatre when we cut it was a trailer for *The Band Wagon*. Technicolor, where we had a cutting room for a while as a part of our deal with them, was throwing away a lot of stuff from their vaults, including A-mat's of the short chapter for *The Band Wagon*, so we simply cut it in as a stopgap expedient, just as you would lay white music that you didn't have the rights to over a scene that you would later replace with music that was composed for the scene or that you had obtained the rights to. If the scene were ultimately to have music, especially a scene with no dialogue, you didn't want dead silence when you screened the cut, you needed music, so you put in something that everyone understood was temporary. It was the same thing with our using the trailer from *The Band Wagon*.

was just a diagram for the fact that ultimately there would be something on the screen. Of course it was a little sacrilegious to put up an B print of a trailer for *The Band Wagon*, but that is what did. We had a whole one thousand foot roll of them.

The top-flight talent agency International Creative Management.

The lawsuit was probably because of the retitling *Revenge of the Screaming Dead*.

Scott Conrad went on to edit *Rocky* (1976) and Curtis Hanson's *The Bedroom Window* (1987), as well as cult items like *A Boy in the Dog* (1975) and *Up in Smoke* (1978).

Weber is credited on the film as 'associate editor'. He went on to cut Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978), Walter Hill's *48 Hrs* (1982), Tim Burton's *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985), and Tony Scott's *Top Gun* (1986).

Reduced onscreen as Jack Fiske.

Hill of course made a splash with his excellent street gang movie *The Warriors* (1979) before hitting the Hollywood A list with *48 Hrs* (1982).



Mr. Mel Smith (producer)

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Hollywood After Dark

The Films of John Hayes

with interview material from the director's work with Ellen Hayes and actress Rue McClanahan.

Dream No Evil (1971)

In a way *Dream No Evil* may have explored some of the darker aspects of John's life, although he'd probably deny it. But there they are: childhood abandonment, insanity (his sister Dolly's) and religious excess (also Dolly)."

Ellen Hayes

Prologue: Eight-year-old Grace lives in an orphanage run by nuns. Convinced that one day her daddy will come back to retrieve her, she suffers terribly when rescue fails to materialise. There is not a shred of comfort from the nuns, who are stern and indifferent. One day, she and a long line of other orphans are examined by an imperious well-dressed woman. After this dehumanising ritual, Grace is adopted.

Eleven years later, Grace Brooke Mills, has grown up into a troubled young woman working as a performer in an evangelist roadshow, a sort of travelling circus with religious overtones. Her act involves leaping from a precarious thirty-foot pile onto an air-cushion, to demonstrate the Fall of the Damned, and God's mercy. This cheap, hucksterish charade is run by Jesse Bundy (Michael Pataki), a fiery preacher of dubious morality. He desires Grace, but reins it in his lust because Grace has entered a chaste relationship with his brother Patrick (Paul Prokopy). Patrick has "fallen from the faith" and now studies medicine. He is conscientious, loving, and patient, but the longer Grace denies him physical intimacy, the harder it is for him to ignore the overtures of a pretty med-student whom he's coaching. Grace, meanwhile, is still obsessed with finding her father. When the Bundy Roadshow visits the town he once lived in, she decides to hunt him down. Wandering into an old hotel, she meets an elderly pimp (Marc Lawrence with a harem of old-West floozies. The pimp is also the town undertaker, and he tells Grace that he has the body of her recently deceased father "on ice". At the mortuary, Grace sees her father (Edmond O'Brien) rise from the slab and kill the undertaker. She subsequently breaks off her relationship with Patrick and moves in with Daddy. The two live on a ranch in regal Deep-South splendour, and Grace is blissfully happy. Others, however, suspect that something is amiss, and when they attempt to intervene, Grace's mind snaps.

Dream No Evil is a modern Gothic in the Flannery O'Connor vein, an emotionally involving tale that's both macabre and terribly sad. Hayes kicks off at the bleakest

way, with a little girl in an institution, locked in a padded convent school, screaming for her daddy as rain fills the night. Unsympathetic nuns assure her she's quite alone in the world. ("Daddy's coming to get me out of this place."

"You have no daddy.") Such scenes have been done elsewhere (another great example is the extended prologue of Charles Seliger Jr.'s *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, where it's a little boy in the same situation), but Hayes brings a sort of drab, unadorned realism to Grace's misery, setting up her disturbed reactions for later. So far so good, but it's here that we bump into the first major obstacle to *Dream No Evil*'s reputation.

From year to year, town to town, Grace stayed on with her adopted church to continue searching for her father. She became engaged to young Patrick Bundy who gave up the ministry to study medicine. Now only his older brother Jesse remained, turning a once respected church into a carnival.

Like Willard Huyck's *Messiah of Evil*, John Hayes's *Dream No Evil* labours under an intrusive and completely unnecessary voice-over, which explains the film at the expense of its magic. It would seem that the overdubs were added to make things easier to understand, probably after the film tanked under its original title *The Faith Healer*, but they're so heavy-handed they simply insult our intelligence in one instance sabotaging the film's most beautifully turned surprise. Basically (and jump to the next review now if you'd rather not know) the voice-over telegraphs a switch from fantasy to reality. Grace is shown sitting in a beautiful *Gone with the Wind*-style bedroom, which changes in the slash of an editor's razor to reveal her true surroundings: the same room, but run-down and decrepit, a mouldering reality of smashed timbers and mildewed carpet. This would have been startling if the voice-over had not already told us there was something unreal about what we were seeing.

The late Marc Lawrence, film noir icon of *Key Largo* fame, and director of the fabulous *Pigs* (see review section), gives the story a boost in a small but pivotal role, while another grandee of classic Hollywood, Edmond O'Brien, who co-starred in *White Heat* (1949) and *D.O.A.* (1950), appears as Grace's father. Both actors play illusory figures, summoned by Grace's imagination. That these important roles are taken by two such iconic actors seems to suggest the way cinema can become a refuge from real-life misery and loneliness. And when it comes to casting, where better

British video cover for *Dream No Evil*, released (with typically atrocious K&S typography) by AYR, one of the first post-Video Recordings Act companies to venture back into horror (they also released *Love Me, Love My Monsters*, *The Creeper* and *The Screamer*).





up in bed with Shirley, the
mrs when Grace rejects
Dream No Evil



"...posts than the flickering celluloid of dross gone by" O'Brien made nearly a hundred Hollywood pictures, while Lawrence chalked up nearly two hundred. Both have the sort of faces that just about anyone who loves the American cinema of the 1940s and 1950s would recognise, even if their names are harder to summon.

In a 'rubber reality' trick that has been played again and again in modern cinema, most notably in *Fight Club*, it turns out that illusion has dominated the film even more than we may have suspected. When Patrick searches for the funeral parlour to investigate what happened here, he can find no such building. It's a simple ghost story ploy, of course, but done with considerable economy and atmosphere, making the unnecessary voice-over all the more annoying.

As a director, Hayes doesn't strive for surrealist effects, nor does he exaggerate the technical artifice of cinema. *Dream No Evil* achieves its strange, disconsolate atmosphere without flamboyance. The emphasis is on feeling, with a tragic scenario in which the heroine's quest to find happiness is doomed because of her childhood. It all gains extra resonance when the circumstances of the director's family life are known (see remainder of this chapter): the name Patrick, given to Grace's boyfriend, a humanist doctor who has turned his back on the family religion, suggests that John Patrick Hayes was angry about the role the Church played in the distortion and demoralisation of his sister's psyche. Yet he cannot bring himself to critique her childish fantasy; instead he shoots Grace's dream of life on the farm with a loving glow that cradles her yearning. Grace is deeply immersed in her imaginary world, and it's Hayes himself who so tenderly lays it out for her on the screen. It's a genuine wrench when we cut abruptly to reality, and the decaying emptiness in which Grace really lives.

It's possible that Hayes himself identified with Grace. The recurrence of abandonment as a motif throughout his work suggests such a reading. In a way, Grace becomes a surrogate through whom Hayes can more legitimately explore his own feelings of abandonment, feelings he might have found hard to express directly. As a blunt Irish American brought up in the 1930s, it can't have been easy to find acceptable outlets for his own anguish. The naïve 'arts-and-flowers' romance of Grace's father-fantasy is not criticised by the film, which will perhaps alienate more cynical or demanding viewers. We are asked to feel sorrow for Grace's ultimate disillusionment, whereas a more rigorous filmmaker would see this as tantamount to encouraging her self-delusion. However, if Grace is in some way Hayes's surrogate, then the very fact that he has written this film about the stripping away of a character's illusions is honesty enough. For a commercial filmmaker with little avowed interest in 'art', Hayes brings an emotional reservoir to *Dream No Evil* that one doesn't always find in the horror genre. Looking at this, along with Hayes's earlier films, and the astonishing *Baby Rosemary* (see later in this chapter) you can't help wondering what might have become of this very creative man if he'd been blessed with more money and better feedback for his movies.

A note: The film was first submitted to the MPAA in 1972 as *The Faith Healer*, which it received an R rating. A year later it was re-rated PG as *Dream No Evil*. I can find no record of the differences between the two, nor any indication of when the version called *Now I Lay Me Down to Die* was released.



Grave of the Vampire (1972)

This is one of the great blood-sucking pictures coming in the wake of *Count Dracula*. It is perverse, interesting, and exciting in concept and presentation." — *Richard Meyers, For the Week Ends*

A mixture of savvy, cry, compelling strangeness and dumb exploitation. — *Dr Cyclops, Fangoria*

'Grim and nasty.' — *Kim Newman, Nightmare Movie*

The 1930s. A vampire called Caleb Cross (Michael Pataki) rises from a crypt to attack a young couple making out in a foggy graveyard. The young man (Jay Scott) is killed, his back broken over a tombstone. The vampire then rapes the woman, Leslie (Kitty Vallacher) in an open grave. Dawn breaks and the fiend staggers off, seeking cover as the sun comes up. The victim recovers in hospital, only to find that she's pregnant. She spurns the advice of doctors, who tell her that the child is not alive, but rather a "parasite" drawing blood from her body while lacking life itself. Leslie checks out of hospital and resolves to have her baby at home. When the child is born she's concerned that it looks unusually grey. It refuses to feed, but when an accidental cut spills mother's blood on its lips, the eager tot licks it up. Her maternal instinct aroused, Leslie cuts her breast, and at last the baby feeds.

Grave of the Vampire begins with an abrupt deluge of Gothic clichés that really shouldn't work. A combination of swirling fog, gravestones explored by a prowling camera, a vampire emerging from his coffin, and a pumping heartbeat on the soundtrack surely these archaic horror trappings need some sort of context to work their magic? Yet somehow, *Grave of the Vampire* taps us directly into the Gothic horror mother-lode. A subdued twinkie of organ under the heartbeat feels like leakage from Amando de

Ossorio's *Tombs of the Blind Dead* (a Spanish horror masterpiece dripping its sepulchral way across Europe during '97), and the image of the vampire in his coffin bedecked with a frosting of cobwebs, looks like cover art from the horror comics of the '40s. (With their lurid visual style at least twenty years ahead of the movies, these pulp mini-masterpieces had an effect on American horror cinema that cannot be over-estimated.)

Grave's writer David Chase turned his hand to horror in 1974, with eight episodes of the spooky TV hit *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974-75). Nowadays he's busy as the writer of an obscure indie TV show called *The Sopranos*, but hey, not everyone can make the big time. He certainly shows promise here: the script, based on Chase's own novel *The Still Life*, keeps hitting us with bone-deep twists on the vampire movie tradition. When we see a mother use a syringe, drawing blood from her own arm to fill up a baby bottle, it's a genuinely haunting image that updates tired vampire clichés and adds a deep irony: mother's milk itself is likened to a drug, and vice versa. As the story unfolds it takes a distinctly Oedipal turn, and this image of a mother feeding her blood to a vampire baby resonates with all sorts of inferences. It taps into women's fears about maternity, exploring ambiguous emotions in a way that suggests both Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* and Larry Cohen's *It's Alive* (the latter made two years later); and it suggests how children can be shackled by the drug of motherhood and the inescapable influence of bloodline.

Grave swerves recklessly through a ninety-degree turn about thirty minutes in, when we're rushed through a thick-and-fast flurry of voice-over revelations. The blood-loving baby has grown up to be a strapping young man; his mother died due to his sanguinary needs, and the vengeful son has set out to hunt for his father, who has sequestered himself in a university teaching history (under the assumed name of Lockwood). A lot of this is communicated in less than two minutes screen time, a narrative body blow from which the movie takes a while to recover. The present-day setting also temporarily robs the film of its atmosphere. The fog and the gloom are gone, and we're in a beautifully familiar world of too-old college students being helpfully lectured on the film's occult themes by the villain. The elision is enough to make your ears pop: something tells me that Chase's original story was too long! Hayes performs a bypass on the narrative, and in his haste creates an expository blood-clot, necessitating a tedious catch-up lecture from Croll/Lockwood. The rhythm of the film heads dangerously close to pulmonary failure.



And it is not lost, though, because seventies horror mainstay Michael Pataki (also to be seen in Hayes's *Dream No Evil*) delivers a dish of actorly cold cuts that revives the scary ambience of the first half hour. He's one of those actors who can command the screen while holding something back to indicate that he's playing with us. Vincent Price was the master of this tactic, both inhabiting and standing aside from his roles. Pataki is less well-known, but his forte is much the same. He turns up in many an enjoyable B-movie romp, and always acquits himself well within the framework of what is being offered. I would recommend his directorial debut too: *Manion of the Damned* (1976), his take on *Les yeux sans visage* is doggerel compared to Franju's haunting poetry, but it has a streak of malicious energy that appeals just the same.

Once *Grave*'s slickly-directed college-class scenes are out of the way, we're introduced to eager-beaver student Anita (Diane Holden), whose fervent desire to actually become a vampire not only invigorates the screenplay but, one could argue, pre-empt's the entire Goth subculture. She tries to seduce 'Professor Lockwood', but despite the mystical décor of her apartment (Tarot card blow-ups on the wall, etc.), and her insight that he is truly a vampire, the undead object of her desire remains frustratingly cold to the touch. Just to rub it in, 'Lockwood' murders her. And that, you might think, would be that. But Hayes and Chase have another surprise for us, during a seance convened by the killer.

Without a doubt the film's biggest liability is biker-movie stalwart William Smith, who plays the challenging role of the vampire's son with all the expressive zest of a breezeblock. It's not really his fault, he's simply miscast. Smith's screen presence is primarily physical, macho, and imposing; he's like an off-duty pro-wrestler who's stumbled onto a movie set. There are plenty of roles for which his emotional immobility would be ideally suited, but the conflicted rage required of this character eludes him. *Grave of the Vampire* is essentially an Oedipal story, baldly so at times, with the son seeking to kill the father for molesting the mother. The knock-down, drag-out fight scene between Smith and Pataki plays to the younger man's strengths, but when he finally kills his father, only to sprout fangs himself, he simply doesn't have the range to express the necessary horror and despair. And speaking of Oedipus, this final twist is of course another Freudian reference: the son kills the father but he doesn't erase patriarchy: he simply takes the father's place, thus perpetuating it.

Comparing this film to George Romero's *Martin* would be wildly overstating things (*Martin* is after all the most beautiful of American horror films), but *Grave of the Vampire*, like Romero's masterpiece, rings some thrilling changes on vampire lore. Scenes we've sat through a hundred times in the genre are succeeded by others which come right out of the blue. Instead of a nothing entry in what was by then a pretty moribund subgenre, *Grave of the Vampire* rises above its generic origins. Rather than playing the vampire for camp amusement (as was more common at the time: see *Dracula* (*The Dirty Old Man*) (1969) or *Guess What Happened to Count Dracula* (1970)), it finds fresh and interesting nuances, nurturing hybrid possibilities that were perhaps only later embraced through the New Wave horror fiction of Clive Barker.



Two different pieces of US promotional art for *Grave of the Vampire*.

Garden of the Dead (1972)

Inmates of a country prison camp are put to work manufacturing formaldehyde. Unbeknown to the guards and the Governor, many of the prisoners have become hooked on the fumes. Some of the men plan and execute a breakout, but they are swiftly hunted down and shot. That night, as they are buried in hastily-dug graves, the dead come back to life and march on the prison camp, where they force entrance, seeking revenge on the prison staff and craving another hit of their beloved formaldehyde.

Horror cinema in the early seventies was slowly absorbing the influence of *Night of the Living Dead*. In the half decade after its release in 1968, Romero's landmark film enjoyed gradual word-of-mouth exposure throughout America (spurred on in the public consciousness by a pricelessly hostile review in *Reader's Digest*). A ragtag number of variants followed, including John Hancock's *Let's Scare Jessica To Death* (1971), Bob Clark's *Death of a Clown* (1971) and William Shusterman's *Messiah of Evil* (1973). What unites these disparate movies is their idiosyncratic refusal simply to imitate the Romero film. In fact it's debatable whether we're actually dealing with zombies at all in Hancock's film – if we are, the definition of the term has to be broadened, rather than consigned around Romero's template. Nevertheless, the influence is certainly there (as it is in David Cronenberg's 1975 film *Shivers* whose zombie-like sex addicts want to fuck you, not eat you). It wasn't until Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) cemented that zombies are flesh-eating reanimated corpses that other films finally took the line.

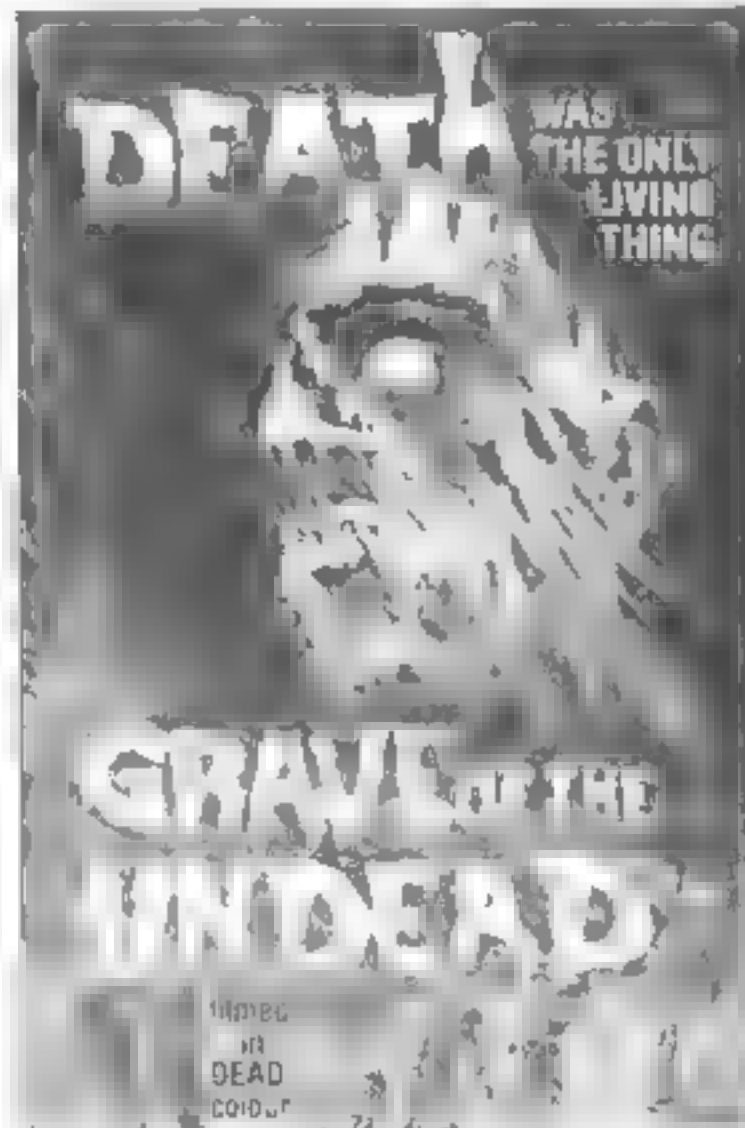
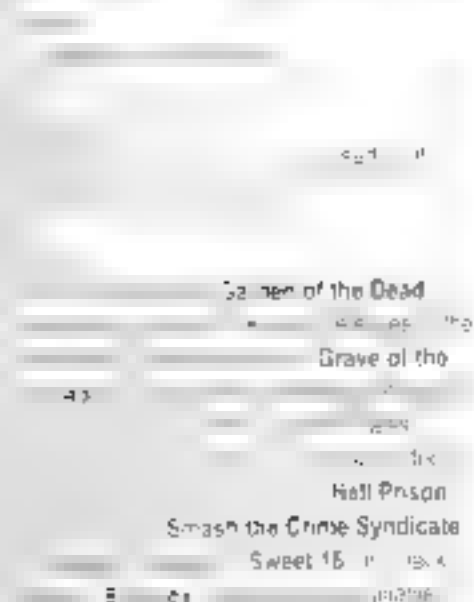
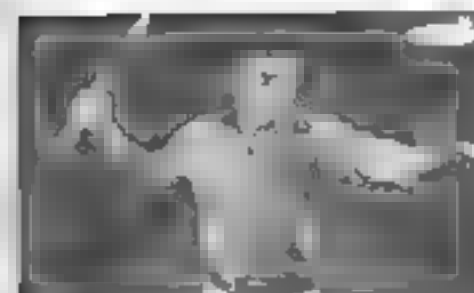
Night of the Living Dead was undoubtedly a factor in the funding of John Hayes's *Garden of the Dead*, but this is not a film that can be ranked alongside the other post-*Night*



films mentioned. Instead it's a blatant rush job from Hayes that must count as one of the most cock-handed efforts of his career (sex films included). It is, however, thankfully short (around 58 minutes) and there's fun to be had with it if you're willing to suppress your desire for a decent film and just marvel at the creaky contrivances. If anything, Hayes made a film that harks back to the likes of the Monogram cheapie *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943) or Edward L. Cahn's *Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957) – the latter produced by Clover Films (coincidentally the name of Dan Cady's and John Hayes's own (unrelated) production company) – if you wonder if Hayes ever really saw *Night of the Living Dead*, perhaps he merely responded to producer Cady's suggestion of a cash-in on the Romero hit by reaching back to his memories of the Monogram cheapies for inspiration.

That said, it's amusing to note that Hayes has his zombies emerge from the grave with skills it would take Romero's another thirty-three years to embrace! Just as in Romero's comeback film *Lana of the Dead* (2005), the zombies in *Garden of the Dead* can use tools, understand their surroundings, and plot revenge: they're also sufficiently socialised to follow a leader. Sorry, George John Hayes got there first... This bunch can even speak and issue ultimatums, which takes them way beyond the crowd (although Bob Clark's zombie soldier in *Death of a Clown* does likewise). Some of Hayes's other innovations, though, are less likely to be adopted in future exploitations of the theme. His zombies are frequently felled by a shotgun blast to the chest, and in the film's most bizarre scenes they pour formaldehyde over themselves, drink it ecstatically, and wash their faces in it. It's certainly an unusual sight in a zombie flick to see the undead grinning with pleasure, but something tells me the actors were reluctant to actually swallow the foul-looking red liquid that passes for formaldehyde in the film: certainly no one risks getting it in the mouth, and Hayes instead has to accept his cast merely splashing it over themselves, like super-criminals gleefully playing with stolen money.

On the other hand, a quick browse through *The Home Poisoner's Handbook* (don't get married without it) suggests that Jack Matcha, who wrote this script while contributing to *The Brady Bunch* the same year, undertook at least some research to back up his mad idea. Formaldehyde can be inhaled as a gas or vapour (as seen in the early scenes) but it can also be absorbed through the skin as a liquid, so maybe having the zombies bathe in it isn't as silly as it first seems. In every other respect, though, the formaldehyde notion is just crazy. A colourless, strong-smelling gas commonly suspended in fluid and used as a preservative in medical laboratories and mortuaries, formaldehyde is extremely irritating to the eyes, nose, and throat. Using it as



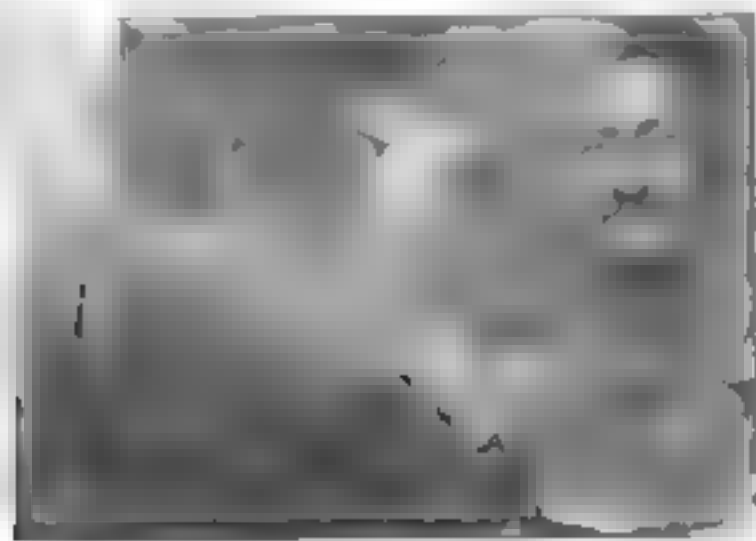
see the convicts doing (i.e. breathing it neat from a tube) would cause severe inflammatory reactions of the mouth, throat and lungs, and concentrations over a hundred parts per million are not recommended. But when the convicts emerge from their graves, having being killed only hours before, they already look discoloured, decayed and mouldy. This would be ridiculous in any film, but since they've been ingesting formaldehyde too, they don't rot more slowly, nor more quickly, than usual. Formaldehyde kills most bacteria, destroys fungal growths and is commonly used as a disinfectant. But while this is one zombie innovation that has to be filed under 'D' for Dumb, I can't help liking it anyway. There's something about the flagrant disregard for logic and basic science that's charming even if it is bloody stupid.

Garden of the Dead began filming in mid-May of 1972, and it seems likely that it was made purely to fill up the second half of a planned Hayes double bill with the far superior *Grave of the Vampire*, shot earlier that year. Several key crew members were held over: both films were shot by Paul Hipp, with camera assistant Ron Johnson; both had Henning Schellierup as soundman; and the art direction on both films was by Earl Marshall. At least one of the grips, Mike Petrich, also worked on both shoots, so it's reasonable to assume that the second film was hastily convened to make use of the crew from *Grave*. (The double-bill theory also explains why *Garden* is so short.)

Notable faces in the cast include Eric Link, Stern, best known for his role in *The Love Butcher* (here acting without his hairpiece); Mariand Proctor, a Hayes regular also familiar from Leonard Korman's *Curse of the Headless Horseman*; and Tony Vorno, Hayes's regular collaborator on both sides of the camera. The special make-up was handled by future luminary of the field, Joe Blasco – he invented the bladder effects used to simulate movement under the skin seen in David Cronenberg's *Shivers*, and handled the grisly mutilations in *Isa, She Wolf of the SS*). Here, as well as providing your basic discoloured zombie countenance, he creates an especially putrefied example that looks like it was assembled

from wet tissue-paper spray-painted onto the actor's face. Somehow it works rather well, and when the actor coughs up a mouthful of thick white goo, the combination provides *Garden of the Dead* with its only bona fide 'Yuk!' moment.

Scored with jazz music more suited to Hayes's earlier work – like *Walk the Angry Beach* or *Five Minutes to Love* – than a modern zombie film, *Garden of the Dead* is never going to earn a place in horror's Hall of Fame, so it's just as well Hayes eclipsed it with its immediate neighbours, *Dream No Evil* and *Grave of the Vampire*, both of which deserve far more attention.



Hollywood After Dark



This chapter would never have taken flight without the contributions of the director's widow, Ellen Hayes, or his long-time friend and colleague, actress Rue McClanahan. I extend my sincerest gratitude to them both.

The name of John Hayes draws the attention of horror fans thanks to a brace of offbeat seventies movies, the *Grave of the Vampire* and the melancholy *Dream No Evil*. However, curiosity would just as quickly be crushed by a viewing of *Garden of the Dead*, or the slow-moving sci-fi venture *End of the World*, two further Hayes titles awaiting the unwary on video shelves during the 1980s.

But these four movies are only the tip of the iceberg. Starting out in the late fifties as a purveyor of gritty b/w dramas, Hayes journeyed along the highways and alleyways of the independent US exploitation industry, right the way through to the mid-1980s, when the advent of hardcore porn on videotape finally put the mockers on his favoured brand of dark erotic melodrama. Along the way he gave a major TV comedy star her first breaks, contributed to the roughie subgenre of semi-explicit sexploitation films, and made two striking and unusual horror pictures, before crashing and burning in the ghettos of eighties straight-to-video porn.

What's striking about this writer-director's career trajectory is the way that he returns, time and time again, to the experiences of his childhood, revisiting familial traumas in a variety of settings, from melodrama to horror to hardcore. It's this obsessional quality that reveals a true artistic temperament. Hayes often wrote his own films, or at least contributed to the screenplays, which guarantees a degree of personal investment on his part. While the huge variation in quality between, say, *Five Minutes to Love* (1963) and *The Cat-Threshold* (1969) would require some formidable, not to say absurd, theoretical gymnastics to make an auteurist point, it's fair to say that the best Hayes films share a definite stylistic persona. Taken at a glance, the morose theatrical flair of *Five Minutes to Love* and the nihilistic despair of Hayes's darkest film, *Burnt Rosemary*, scarcely feel like the work of the same person. But if we can see beyond the sexual explicitness of the latter, both films display a characteristically downbeat worldview, an aversion for profane dialogue, and a real concern for the lost souls of life. The films Hayes made with Paul Leder in the early sixties are classy, intelligent and well shot; the later erotic films are seedy, cynical and technically ramshackle. Between these two extremes, Hayes journeyed through many of the major genres, following the ups and downs of the exploitation film market for nearly forty years. This in itself would make a study of his films worthwhile, and when we consider the emotional qualities of his best work, it's clear that Hayes deserves credit for genuine creativity too.

Early Days

John Patrick Hayes was born on 1 March, 1930 in New York City. His grandparents were Irish immigrants and his father's family worked on the Manhattan docks. His parents went through a bitter divorce when he was just four; consequently he was taken in by an alcoholic paternal uncle and an elderly grandmother, who shared a home



DVD artwork for a budget *Grave of the Vampire*

A pastiche of Jean Genet's smoke-staring prisoners in *Un chant d'amour* – not, but this strange scene from *Garden of the Dead* has an inadvertent erotic quality that might have amused the *Thief's* director.

The Thief's director



together. His sister Dolores fared worse – she was raised in a convent and, after two early marriages and several children, developed schizophrenia marked by religious fanaticism.

At seventeen, Hayes joined the Navy. When he was discharged a couple of years later, his mother pointed him towards the New York Dramatic Workshop across from her apartment, telling him that he needed to get some culture. (It was the same building where, in 1944, Maynard Morris “discovered” the young Marlon Brando.) Watching the students working on a scene from *Death of a Salesman*, Hayes fell in love with the theatre and began attending evening classes. He also studied playwriting with Lajos Egri (whose milestone book *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, first published in 1946, made him the Robert McKee of his day).

As an actor, Hayes lacked nothing when it came to aesthetic daring, and – as encouraged by the teaching of the day – he drew on his personal experiences to govern his acting choices. In 1953 he appeared in the Actors Studio production of Calder Willingham’s play about sadism in the army, *End Is a Man* (filmed in 1957 as *The Strange One* with much of its homosexual subtext removed), performing at the Studio and on Broadway.¹ He also appeared in *A Hatful of Rain*, another play critical of the Army. Michael Cazzo’s tale of a soldier returning from Korea addicted to heroin (“Hello Police? I want to report a drug addict. It’s my husband”) was originally created in 1954 by members of the Actors Studio, including Shelley Winters, Ben Gazzara and Anthony Franciosa. Hayes played the role of Chooch in the original Broadway production, and then ploughed onwards with the Road Company through the summer of 1957. In the Fall of that year he was cast in the original production of *West Side Story* as Lt. Schrank (a part played by Simon Oakland in the movie adaptation). He opened out of town to good reviews but to his disappointment did not continue to Broadway.

Then came the movies.

Awards and Ambitions

Acclaimed actress Rue McClanahan, best known as ‘Blanche Devereaux’ in the much-loved 1980s sitcom *The Golden Girls*, knew Hayes very well at the time: she appeared in four of his early films and remained a close friend throughout his life. She recalls: “John got a role as one of the policemen in the musical *West Side Story* on Broadway, and it was while he was playing that little part that he sat backstage and wrote a short black-and-white film called *The Kiss* (1958). It was delightful, very funny, it’s about a young man who is inept with girls. He goes around various people trying to learn how to kiss – he’s very shy with women. He finally takes a girl he takes on a Ferris wheel, and at the top of the Ferris wheel he gets up the nerve to kiss her – and the whole movie turns Technicolor! They float back down to earth for a happy ending. It’s a delightful little film. I think it was about twenty-nine minutes long. He borrowed \$5,000 from his mother to make it. He wrote and produced and directed it, and did the whole thing in New York. He got nominated for an Oscar, which took him to Hollywood. Disney won that year with *Grand Canyon* – that was a blockbuster, and John’s was this sweet little personal film. I met him right after that.”

With an Academy Award Nomination under his belt, Hayes moved to Hollywood and began hustling for a

feature film gig. He was to live in Los Angeles for the rest of his life, though he occasionally returned to New York. He always felt attached to the ‘Big Apple’, that most iconic of American cities. His widow Ellen Hayes feels that, “The fantasy world of Coney Island and Luna Park played a large role in John’s imagination, as did Radio City Music Hall and the old vaudeville skits, undoubtedly for the escape they provided from the harsh realities of his childhood.”

Hayes gained his first feature film experience working on the script for Alexander Singer’s *A Cold Wind in August* in 1960. Burton (Ria Lohr) Wohl took the headline writing credit, with Hayes noted for “additional dialogue” although it’s said his contribution was far more than that. The film is a sleazy heartbreaker about an ageing stripper (played by Lora Abrighi) who seduces the horny teenage son of a local dignitary. For a precious while the stripper knows sexual bliss, until her toyboy’s buddies maliciously tell him what his older lover does for a living: it’s like a 1951 September variant on Sam Fuller’s *Naked Kiss*. (In his book *Cruckpot*, John Waters lists *A Cold Wind in August* as one of his all-time film favourites, alongside Bergman’s *Brink of Life* and Pasolini’s *Teorema*, explaining, “[It] may not have been a cult film anywhere else in the United States, but it played forever in Baltimore. Every time an art-house would book a flop they’d yank it and bring back *A Cold Wind in August*.” (If you should chance on it, look out for Hayes himself, who appears briefly as a hot dog vendor.)

Walk the Angry Beach, The Grass Eater, and Five Minutes to Love

Having settled in Los Angeles, Hayes made the necessary contacts and began his feature directing career with a sombre melodrama called *Walk the Angry Beach*. It stars Danie DiSomma (aka ‘Jack Vorn’) as Tony, a young man who hits the skids when his wife leaves. Soon after his junkyard business folds and he’s forced to consider joining Nick (Paul Bruce) and Tommy (John Barick), two crooks who offer to cut him in on a waterfront hold-up. They plan to rob a wage-truck and then toss the money bag off the pier into the sea, where Tony (a skilled scuba-diver) can lie in wait and retrieve it. While visiting Nick’s burlesque joint, Tony meets Sandy (Rue McClanahan), a stripper and aspiring actress. Like him, Sandy is losing a grip on her ideals. Nick wants her to reveal more flesh and dance more provocatively. She attends a ‘reading’ with a sleazy film producer but ends up drugged and ravished. Disillusioned, she grows ever more resigned to her fate as a mere sex object. Tony too gives in, and joins Nick and Tommy. After participating in the robbery returning with the bag of money to a motel where Sandy is staying, Tony offers to take Sandy away with him, but she refuses. He goes to the strip joint to deliver the money, intending to decline his cut and regain his self-respect, but Tommy knifes him. Tony makes it back to the motel, but dies in Sandy’s arms.

It’s not easy to establish the original release date for his film – it was re-issued as *Hollywood After Dark* in 1969, and this is the only version to have made it onto video, with all original credits excised. However, Rue McClanahan is sure of when the film was shot. “That one was done in ‘59, between September and the end of the year. My agent called and said, ‘There’s this wonderful

screen from *Walk the Angry Beach* aka *Hollywood After Dark*

from the
Sandy (Rue McClanahan) is angered by the
burlesque club-owner's demands
Tony (Jack Vorn) and Rue McClanahan argue
in the street
A slightly more raucous burlesque dancer
Joanna, added to the film when it was re-
released as *Hollywood After Dark* in 1969
Rue McClanahan performs onstage
in the scene before audience
Paul Bruce prepares his criminal
plan
Tommy (John Barick) tries to kill Tony, but
gets a arm smashed in his face
The police chase Tommy off the road

...independent film and you're just right for the lead. Can you come out and audition for the producer and director?" I walked into this somewhat rundown office in Hollywood and first I met Paul Leder. He said, "The director John Hayes is doing the casting, here he is now and there's this six-foot-four, thirty-year-old blond from New York. He put me into a little inner office and we started reading the scene; he loved my interpretation and acting style and he hired me. I mean hired, but for no money. Everything was done with a hope that it would get distributed and then you would all get paid accordingly. But it didn't get distributed. It made its premiere in 1960 as I recall. I got a wonderful review in one of the trade papers, *Variety* or *The Hollywood Reporter*. John got good reviews for the writing and directing, but it really did need some money behind it. We were shooting on short ends. It was a very grueling experience physically, because, not being union, you just worked until they said okay we're stopping. We would work eighteen hours a day very regularly, and one day for twenty-four hours. Someone asked John, "Don't you guys fall asleep on the set?" And he said, "No, but we faint quite often!" Well, our cameraman really *did* fall asleep one night with his eye resting on the eyepiece of the camera! I sort of felt for John, and he sort of felt for me. We began an affair. He was shy of getting married—he'd already been married and had two little girls, in fact at the time he wasn't quite divorced because his wife wouldn't give him one. John was jolly and funny and I thought he had a good career ahead of him; he was such a talented director and writer."

McClanahan's first marriage broke up in 1958, after only a year, by which time she was five months pregnant. When she met Hayes in 1959, her son Mark had been born and she'd already remarried, to actor Norman Hartwig (aka Norman Hartweg). "I wanted to get a home established for my little boy back in Oklahoma, and Norman and I just weren't working out," she recalls. "In *Walk the Angry Beach* I played a stripper who's stripping because she can't get a job as an actress. She falls in love with an actor, and hates being a stripper. There were a couple of scenes where I had to cry and it was easy to do because all I had to do was think of Mark, who was now living with my mother in Oklahoma, and who I missed sorely."

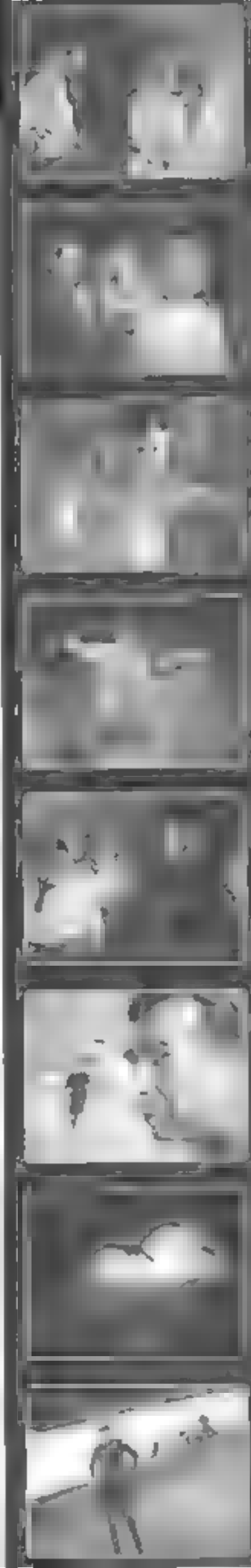
Hayes's key supporter and ally on his first three movies was Paul Leder, a multi-talented writer, actor and producer. Leder co-produced *Walk the Angry Beach*, produced and starred in Hayes's next two films, *The Grass Is Greener* and *Five Minutes to Love*, and co-wrote the latter. He would go on to forge a long and varied directing career, with work including the psycho-thriller *Four Alberts & Little Albert* (better known as *I Dismember Mama*) and the moody psychological horror *My Friends Need Killing*. *Walk the Angry Beach* also marked the first time Hayes worked with actor-director Dante DiSomma (aka Sebastian Gregory, aka Tony Vorno, aka Jack Vorno). DiSomma became a regular friend and collaborator, working on many of Hayes's films in one capacity or another. (See interview with DiSomma elsewhere in this book). The jazzy score, by Bill Marx, who went on to compose music for Ray Danton's *Deathmaster*, Bud Townsend's *The Folks at Red Hot Inn*, and the Count Yorga films, while the cinematography was by Latvian émigré Vilis Lapiņš, who shot Curtis Harrington's extraordinary directorial debut *Night Tide* and collaborated with Hayes on several more films in the early 1960s.

Walk the Angry Beach only really comes to life when Rue McClanahan and Jack Vorno are onscreen together. The couple's first meeting, when Sandy goes backstage to discuss her stage act with her boss, is a well-written exchange that shows off Hayes's theatrical experience. Sandy has never met the owner of the club, so when she finds Tony in the boss's chair she assumes he's the person demanding that she make her routine more risqué. In fact, Tony is there to discuss the heist. The two of them talk at cross-purposes, before Tony embarks on a cynical speech about the futility of maintaining moral scruples. With Sandy left in tears by his angry words, Tony apologises and so begins their relationship. Apart from their scenes together, the most effective sequence is one in which Sandy goes to audition for a role with Ernest (Ernest Macias), a writer who uses script-reading sessions as an opportunity to ply girls with alcohol (or maybe drugs, though it's not made clear) to get them into bed. McClanahan conveys the optimism and naivety of her character without her seeming simple or foolish, while Vorno, having followed covertly, is excellent as the furious lover who sees his new girl emerge from this sleazy encounter with her clothes in disarray, and resolves to beat the crap out of her abuser.

As would become the norm for Hayes, this is a sombre tale, described as "too risqué and downbeat for its time" in the *New York Times 40 Movie Guide*—an estimation which may explain why it proved so hard to distribute until much later in the sixties. However, it's also a very moral tale, to a degree that can seem archaic and a little stuffy today. Tony sees his role with Sandy as lifting her "out of hell", a rather extreme claim for the burlesque scene. (Compare the far more positive testimony of Russ Meyer's star, and one-time burlesque performer, Tura Satana.) In the late 1950s, however, it was difficult to show what else might be required of a good-time gal like Sandy, so the bump-and-grind dance McClanahan seductively performs must stand in for the more licentious possibilities. Certainly, the encounter with Ernest makes it clear what a stripper-cum-actress can look forward to in the scummiest echelons of showbusiness. The film does at least hinge upon a considered reflection between Sandy's slide into sleaze and Tony's slide into crime. The moment when Tony decides to hand back his share of the money means that although modern audiences, post *Bonnie and Clyde*, will find him rather straight-faced, we at least don't think he's a hypocrite.

We can assume that John Hayes did not regard the burlesque scene with the same negative eye as Tony, given the increasingly erotic fixations of his later films. However, it is of course a common trait in exploitation films that the very spectacle being offered for consumption is decried by characters in the story—it's the classic showman's way of satirising the prurience of the audience while maintaining a pose of moral rectitude. Double standards? Maybe—but America at the time was hardly the most sexually liberated of places. If you wanted to film something racy, you needed your excuses lined up and ready: the House Un-American Activities Committee had only just disbanded, in '59.

When *Walk the Angry Beach* was re-released as *Hollywood After Dark* in 1969, it was shorn of at least ten minutes, possibly more. Sadly, the latter version is all we have today. The original began with scenes showing Tony's marriage crisis, and made it clear that he loses his business too. In the later version, we join the film during Tony's first encounter with Nick at the yard, dropping the marriage



conflict altogether, and after Tony visits the strip-joint, his junkyard business is never mentioned again. Several other scenes have been shortened, including a long discussion between Tony and Sandy that instead rushes impatiently to their lovers' clinic. Just how much of Hayes's material is missing is hard to verify after forty-five years, and to confuse matters new scenes have clearly been added. McClanahan does not recognise the burlesque routines performed by two other girls, for a start. The set is not the one on which McClanahan dances, and considerably more flesh is revealed (the girls 'shake their booty' with nothing but sand tufts of fake fur stuck on their nipples). For a film ostensibly shot in '59, these extra scenes are at least eight years too explicit. It seems likely that the film was eventually bought by someone who chose to slash Hayes's script back to basics, to make room for more sexy dancing.

Questions abound regarding this period in Hayes's career. For instance, just after *Hulk the Angry Beach* he directed a children's film, title unknown, that has never turned up on any filmography and remains utterly obscure. Rue McClanahan recalls, "It was a children's movie about a dog—a brilliant German Shepherd. We shot that one in Oklahoma, four weeks, a great deal of it shot on a houseboat on a lake North of Tulsa. This amazing dog called 'London' had done a film called *The Littlest Hobo* and he was the star of this one. I played the mother of a

the girl who gets involved with the dog, a small role. I was the script supervisor on that one, for fifty bucks a week, and John was the director. I think that was in 1960."

Daniel DiSarma recalls that Hayes made his third feature *The Grass Eater* (1961), almost immediately after *Hulk the Angry Beach*; clearly he was not inclined to hang around waiting for distribution of his debut. He was joined on the project by playwright-turned-scriptwriter William W. Norton. Born into a prominent Mormon family in Utah, Norton was a firebrand whose participation in the early progressive political movements of the 1950s resulted in him being called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Having maintained a more than casual interest in politics, he was arrested in the 1980s for assisting the passage of arms to the IRA, and spent two years in prison. He would go on to pen *I Dismember Mama* for Leder in 1972, as well as mainstream fare like *The Scalphunters*, *Gator* and *Brannigan*.

The Grass Eater, adapted by Hayes from Norton's stage play, depicts a cynical wanderer (Paul Leder) who convinces a romantically inclined young girl that marriage is a meaningless absurdity. To prove his point, he chooses a married couple at random and proceeds to wreck their union by seducing the other man's wife (a story with some parallels to Roman Polanski's under-rated *Bitter Moon*, made nearly thirty years later). Rue McClanahan appears again ("I play a nice, tipsy wife," she says, "which was funny but it's not my favourite role"), and gaining what may be his first feature film credit was Jaime Mendoza-Nava, a prolific composer whose scores have graced many an indie horror, from Charles Pierce's *The Legend of Boggy Creek* and *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* to Jiminzell's *Psycho from Texas* and John Hayes's own classic *Grave of the Vampire*.

Hayes's next outing was *Five Minutes to Love* (1963), an overheated but engaging crime melodrama about a crooked junkyard owner, Harry (Paul Leder), who runs a car theft operation on the sly. Holding court to his dope-addled flunkies—Blowhard (King Moody) and The Kid

(Norman Hartweg; mispelled here as Hartweg)—Harry rules the roost, supplying drugs to his associates, keeping a prostitute called Poochie (Rue McClanahan) in a shack behind his office, and generally lordng it over anyone who strays into his domain. When out-of-work farm boy man Ben (Will Gregory) comes by, looking for a spare part for his car, Harry introduces him to Poochie, who attempts to seduce him. Meanwhile, Harry sneaks off downtown and frames Ben for auto theft in order to pay off a corrupt police captain (Michael De Carlo) who's been sniffing around for an arrest. While Ben is beaten by Harry and the cops, Blowhard makes a move on Ben's young wife Edna (Caye Gordon), attempting to rape her on a pile of tyres. Ben evades arrest and Harry implicates Blowhard to take the heat off himself. Harry returns to the yard, but the chickens are coming home to roost.

Unless *The Grass Eater* turns up and steals the crown, *Five Minutes to Love* is probably the best of Hayes's early films, with a fast, well-constructed plot, acerbic dialogue, and excellent performances throughout. Rue McClanahan is outstanding as the mentally disturbed prostitute (billed on the poster as "Poochie, the C. in the Shack"), bringing a credible female presence to a film predicated mainly on the failings and aspirations of men. "I thought my role was meaty and challenging," she says, and she's right: this is a cut above your average B-movie fare. McClanahan embodies the character with subtlety and economy, conveying profound derangement through vocal inflection and an emotionally evasive manner instead of grandstanding and rolling her eyes as a lesser actress might have done. 'Poochie' has slipped the cat somewhere; her light and breezy manner is just a bit too flippant. Her incredulous dismissal of questions about her estranged child is genuinely disturbing, and far more effective than a burst of hysteria. The title of the film, drawn from a wonderful monologue delivered by McClanahan, is both a riff on *Five Minutes to Live* (aka *Door to Door Mania*), a Johnny Cash vehicle made in 1961 (which allegedly features McClanahan in an uncredited bit part, although she can't remember doing it), and also an example of clever misdirection. Judging by the poster and its salacious ad line, 'Five minutes to love' sounds like the countdown to some gratuitous sex frolicking; what it actually means in context, as the cynical Poochie explains, is something quite different: "Five minutes, that's all! But you ever look at a clock? That's all it takes, actual time. Five minutes and it's all over [] That's all it is, the real of it. If you make it any more than that it's your own fault. You're crazy." A little on a rather less lubricious spin on the words than audiences might have been expecting! The downbeat flavour—typical of Hayes's films in the following years—is redolent of punk-rocker Johnny Rotten's bitter dismissal of sex, nearly twenty years later, as "five minutes of squelching."

William Norton's stage script is awash with scenes where men rage at each other in the manner of Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee or Arthur Miller. Paul Leder and Norman Hartweg in particular let fly with some sustained screen ranting, sounding off on topics as varied as Nietzsche's Superman, the failure of hope, and the inevitability of corruption. When Poochie freaks out seeing 'The Kid' drinking from a baby's bottle (threatening her repression of memories of her own estranged child), she yells, "I don't wanna see anybody sucking on a baby's bottle!" In response, Hartweg summons the authentic bravura and grandiosity of the Beatnik poets. "I don't

either it's a symbol: Like a brass cyndal or a ruptured plect, and a brass monkey, and a flight of the humblebee and a fare-thee-well, and a well-digger's butt in Montana and a home-is-where-the-heart-is and a homily and an early to bed and an early to rise and a Poor Richard's Almanack Benjamin Franklin was right. The homines of life! Like get up in the morning, and go to work, and save your money and do a good job. It all goes around in a circle, but a desiccated liver is still a penny saved is a penny earned, and any kind of a racket, any kind, is still gonna be crad!" ("John gave him pretty free rein with that scene, as I recall," says McClanahan). Paul Leder is particularly good as Harry in his prolonged warlike against the cops. "The trouble with you fettas is you're all alike," he snarls, goading a meatheaded sergeant to punch him.

"You're either too drunk or too lazy or think you're too smart to work for a living. And then you've got a mean streak, or else you'd be firemen instead!" Harry walks with a limp, a likely reference to Brock Pott in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and the script seems to make the same insinuations about Harry's potency and sexual orientation. He's a little sleazier than Brock, though using a home movie camera, he films his cohorts – the muscle-bound, dope-dealing 'Blowhard' and skinny into actual 'Kid' – making out with Poochie. Not only do we see him getting off on his voyeurism, he also seems far more interested in the men than the girl. "Do some push-ups, Blowhard," he cajoles the big lunk, when they're hanging out at the junkyard together, commenting to Ben,

"There, look at that, a real man!" If the film ultimately declines to explore the relationship between Harry and his male friends, it compensates with a storyline that foregrounds amorality and exploitation, while retaining compassion for those, like 'Poochie', who've been permanently bent out of shape. 'Blowhard' is drawn with a critical eye for the workings of the matriarchate male psyche, as the menacing bequilled lunk moves from a clumsy seduction of Ben's girl towards a drug-fueled attempted rape. "I know all about how a woman works. She says no, she means yes. She don't know what she wants 'til she gets it," he ruminates. Finally, although there's no explicit violence, a scene in which Harry pushes Ben into the darkened maw of a vehicle inspection pit and then heaves chunk after chunk of heavy auto scrap after him is startling in its implication.

With Blowhard shot by the cops and Ben granted a last minute chance to beat the crap out of Harry, the film ends on a tin roof, naturally – with something close to a moral resolution, albeit one with a bitter-sweet quality, as the emotionally detached Poochie offers a near-cornatose Harry her mindless words of comfort. It's a satisfyingly ambiguous and cynical end to a well-told tale. Not that it helped the film make much money. Like *Walk the Angry Beach*, the film went through much retooling to try to find an audience – leading to an eventual outing as *The Rotten Apple*, a re-release featuring an unexpected bonus, a direct to camera address by producer/writer/star Paul Leder himself, which is worth quoting here.

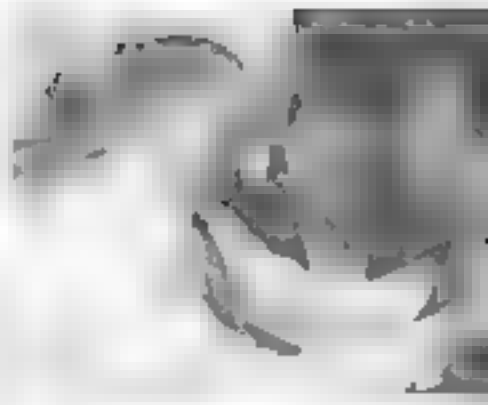
"Why would anyone want to make a story like this? What good purpose would it serve? After viewing tests, the studio called and said they were ready to cast me as Harry. But after going over the story, I told my wife I wouldn't play that role for a million dollars. Next day, we returned the script to the studio. My associates opened a cabinet and spread a dozen large binders in front of me. They were



full of press clippings, magazine stories, police files and medical documents. "Now like many of you, my wife and I are busy parents too. We have three children and we simply didn't realize that we could be raising a rotten apple right here in our own home." I changed my mind and agreed to produce the film. In a minute, you'll see me as Harry, a wrecker of human beings. I'm sure you'll hate me. At least I hope you'll hate me.

Shell Shock, and Farewell

While shooting *Five Minutes to Love*, McClanahan's personal affairs grew more and more complex. Her husband Norman Hartweg's beatnik aspirations meant that notions such as monogamy and marriage were far from fixed: "We had a four year off-and-on marriage and I went back and forth between Norman and John Hayes three times during that period," she explains. "I was married to Norman first before I met John but our marriage was on the rocks. Hartweg was growing more and more eccentric at the time. "Norman was a remarkable man, up until then probably the most brilliant man I'd met. He was extremely tightly wired, capable of doing difficult roles. But it really wasn't working out. He hadn't bathed in eight months, or brushed his teeth, or combed his hair. He never washed his hair. And I asked him one time why he was choosing to be so... repulsive! He said, 'Because I want people to like me for my inner self. And I thought, well we can't get to that inner self because you smell so bad.' He was really confused. None of us had ever really had therapy. He got into LSD then, and got involved with the Ken Kesey group. He was part of that for a year, and he took fifty trips, and the fiftieth trip was a horror and he figured he'd had enough. It did change his thinking, and it straightened him out quite a bit. He got some kind of therapeutic advantage from LSD."



The cops, es...
Five Minutes to Love

JS DVD cover art stressing McClanahan's



Edna Gayer Gordon, menaced by the brass





opposite page: top right
 Pamela Simmons lying under his Tony
 Danza. bottom: the movie's first western Fandango

Shell Shock (1963) was next for Hayes, a WWII picture echoing some of the themes of Calder Willingham's *East Is a Woman*, dealing as it does with an abusive relationship between an authority figure and a common soldier. With the Hollywood Hills passing for 1940s Italy, the film has a few credibility problems, but it's the class-conscious psychodrama that matters more than the spectacle. "I wonder what's going on in that orphanage head of his?" sneers Beach Dickerson's Captain Rance, as Johnny Wade (Carl Crow), one of his more sensitive men, succumbs to combat fatigue after seeing a fellow soldier (Norman Hartweg) shot in the face during a raid on enemy positions. There's an emotional tenderness in the buddy relationship between good-looking but troubled young Wade and his older "brother" from the Orphanage, Gil Evans (Frank Leo). "It's awfully lonesome without you, Johnny," says Gil as he watches over his crazed, traumatised friend. Rance, on the other hand, harbours a homicidal grudge against the younger man, whose decorations for bravery he resents.

"First chance I get... American bullet or German bullet, who knows? But you ain't getting outta here!" The plotline is rescued from the further implications of its anti-war set-up by Wade's escape from the bullying Rance into the arms of a beautiful Italian woman, Maria (Pamela Grey), and Rance's dalliance with an American girl, Gina (Dolores Faith); a sultry apparition in the Italian hills, wrapped in a bath-towel and dancing to jazz records in her back garden, her brassieres hanging on the washing line. The script uses this female character as foreclosure: an afternoon's dancing with a pretty girl is enough to transform psychotic Rance into a reformed character, ashamed of his wicked ways. The not unreasonable thesis seems to be that military life creates psychosis due to the absence of women.

Shell Shock owes much to the A.P. war films of the late 40ies, such as *Jet Attack* and *Tank Commandos*, but it's distinguished from the average by the decent photography of Vilis Iapenicks and its compelling human drama, which emphasises emotional conflict. War films are not among my favourites, generally speaking, but Hayes makes this a lot more involving, but I was expecting Crow as a likeable lad, and his "shell-shocked" demeanour is adequately believable for the period, while Dickerson, better known for more genial roles, is impressively nasty as the villain of the piece.²

McClannahan was script supervisor on *Shell Shock*, and recalls the following incident. "During the shoot the set was visited by representatives of the Screen Actor's Guild, and by this time I was a member. So was one of the cast. We had to pay a hundred dollar fine for being caught doing non-union, but we went right on shooting anyway. That was an exciting afternoon! We had to pick up a four equipment and run, but they caught us. I was really chewed out about it by Ricardo Montalban, who was head of the SAG at the time. But we were at the far outskirts of the movie industry. These movies were shot on the sly for pennies. The only time I got paid was when I was script supervisor on *Shell Shock* and that little dog movie, and I got paid fifty dollars a week for those. But John was passionate about all of them."

The relationship between Hayes and McClannahan was destined never to end in marriage, due to a combination of wariness and bad timing. She recalls, "When I moved to New York in 1964, I got a call from John, saying that he had got a job with an aircraft company on Long Island, making industrial films, and he was flying his own plane

to New York! So he set off and he said he'd like to see me. By then I was involved with 'the Italian', who turned out to be my third husband.³ But before I married him, John came to New York, it took him a week to fly cross-country. It turned out that he didn't have a job on Long Island, he was coming to see me. When John arrived I saw him mid-week and he stayed on at the end of the week. And the Italian said, 'Now look, this has gone on long enough. I'm not putting up with it. You tell that man tonight that you can't see him any more, I want you to promise me you're gonna tell him that.' And I was under his thumb back then and I said yes, okay. Then John took me to a lovely restaurant on Long Island, and proposed. And I said, 'Oh John, I've been waiting four years to hear that and now I've made a promise that I won't see you any more, and I can't break my promise.' (That's really how I felt when I was thirty.) And he said, 'You're making the wrong decision, you're taking second choice and you shouldn't do that.' And I said, 'I made a promise, what can I do?' It was raining, now we left the restaurant and he was crying, tears were just coming down his face and that was the last time I saw him before he hooked up with Ellen's sister. John did come to see me after he was involved with her. I was so unhappy with that Italian by then that I sort of made overtures to him during his visit, and he would have none of it. He'd had enough of my dashing back and forth and turning him down.

Hayes worked once more with Leder and Norton, on *The Farmer's Other Daughter* (1965), which later rejoiced in the glorious reissue title *Haystack Hooker*. It stars Norman Hartweg in his last screen role before driving off into psychedelic adventures with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. The film, a comedy about a poor farmer who plans to sell his lovely daughter to a rich sleazeball, features corporeal humour and music from the Kentucky Colonels, with Emie Ashworth, of the long-running *Grand Ole Opry* country music radio show. Lusty ole Hicksville was the intended market, quite unlike the urban focus of Hayes's previous films. *The Farmer's Other Daughter*, an otherwise chaste sex comedy, marks the beginning of Hayes's transition from psychological melodrama to explicit erotic drama. The sexual revolution was getting started, and Hayes, though a generation behind, was ready to play the game.

Clover Films, Daniel Cady and the Birth of Harold Perkins⁴

Walk the Angry Beach, retitled *The Unholy Choice* and then *Hollywood After Dark*, was at last released theatrically in 1969, but it was a 1968 Hayes project that would really point the way towards his future in the industry. Back in 1961,⁵ parallel to his feature film career, Hayes had begun producing and directing 'industrial' training films for North American Aviation, who had a contract with NASA for the Apollo project, as well as other government and private work.⁶ Around 1965 he formed a company, Clover Films, with a friend called Daniel Cady. After a few non-fiction jobs for NASA, the two men produced a spate of independent horror and sexploitation items, beginning with the extraordinary *Help Wanted Female* in 1966.

As would become the norm for his more erotically inclined films, Hayes adopted the pseudonym 'Harold Perkins'. The story kicks off with Jo-Jo, a hooker who robs Johns of their dough with a few well-placed karate chops

our scenes from *Help Wanted Female*
 Hayes's first film under the pseudonym
 Harold Perkins. The male in each is Tony
 Danza and Pamela Simmons



After a typical afternoon beating the shit out of some schmuck (Michael Lincoln), she returns home to her lesbian lover Luana, who has just been offered \$200 to spend an evening with creepy client Sebastian (Gregory Daniel DiSomma, playing "himself" under his "Sebastian" pseudonym). Setting in for an evening of mind games with Luana, Gregory takes an LSD sugar cube and proceeds to tell her how he and his similarly freaky girlfriend Barbara recently butchered a pretty young hitchhiker whom they persuaded to model for some actual pin-up shots. Luana thinks he's bullshitting, or having an acid freakout, but when she opens a trunk in the kitchen she discovers there may be more to Gregory's tale.

No doubt liberated by his pseudonym, Hayes packs the film with all the kink and sadism the times would allow. At just over an hour in length, it's a fast-paced hustle through the back-alleys of sleazy cinema, sixties-style. The relationship between Gregory and Barbara is frankly sadomasochistic, echoing Ian Brady and Myra Hindley in its depiction of a swindler couple's predatory *folie à deux* ("To inflict pain with pleasure only led to the inevitable for pleasure!" avows Gregory) and anticipating, however faintly, *Via Vendemmia*'s Max Renn and Nick Brand. With its intense sex-play involving burning embers and a knife, Gregory however is determined to be the master of his pleasures, not the victim. After the inevitable, he frets to Barbara that they're putting themselves at risk of the death penalty. Barbara, however, is wantonly unconcerned for their safety, so Gregory takes drastic steps to ensure his liberty. But then twist follows twist and our interpretation of what we've already seen changes again and again.

On the one hand, *Help Wanted Female* is an eerie cynical tale of sex and sadism—and on the other it's a black comedy with a hefty dose of sixties camp, in the form of several burlesque dance numbers and some obvious hard-ons. I guess it all depends on what you've allowed beforehand. Jo-Jo is very cool indeed with her big hair and shirk fin specs, and she has killer moves to go with her moves. "I could rip your arm off if I choose, but instead I think I'll just rip your back muscles a little." Luana, the older woman, has the authentic wear-and-tear of the burlesque scene etched into her features: she's another tough cookie with whom you wouldn't want to argue. But the campy pleasure afforded by these tough girls is absent in scenes such as the one in which Tina is stabbed in the stomach by Barbara, to the accompaniment of a relentless strip-club jazz tune. The music carries on as the nude victim staggers confused and bleeding into the bathroom, where she's finally shed off by Gregory. The fact that the girl doesn't die immediately, and the way the two killers follow her dispassionately as she stumbles away from them, brings to mind Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left*—although let's be clear about this, *Help Wanted Female* is nowhere near as graphic or intense. It's simply that the scene, with its blaring, unsympathetic soundtrack has that element of callousness that was to prove so warning in Craven's shocking debut. And while I'm comparing this obscure flick to the classics, there's a scene where "Sebastian Gregory" begins carving up a female corpse that's framed in almost exactly the same way as the first killing in David Cronenberg's *Shivers*, complete with bare-chested middle-aged man wielding a blade, shot from a low angle and a prostrate female victim in the foreground.



It's a thrill to see this film, not least to enjoy Sebastian Gregory (aka Daniel DiSomma, director of the superlative *Reforms* (see chapter on DiSomma)). Here he is a cold-blooded, cold, glimpse of the black heart he can summon to the screen. DiSomma's forte is playing the weirdo square, who can get down with hookers and druggies yet remains detached and sarcastic in his demeanour, smooching and grooving in a way that's part bourgeois contrain-on-the-make and part piss-taking psychopath, mocking the delusions of the young and liberated. He resembles a depraved Bob Hope here, exuding Hope's smarmy showbiz vibe but with that gunlet-eyed insincerity ratcheted up a little too tight for comfort. (Also appearing in a small role, as a horny neighbour who makes out with Barbara behind Gregory's back, is director/cinematographer Don Jones—see chapter on Jones elsewhere in this book.)

Gregory appeared again in Hayes's next film, a western sex comedy called *Fandango* ("Wagons filled with wild women"), made under Hayes's own name in 1969 and starring James Whitworth (Jupiter in *The Hills Have Eyes*). Also in the cast this time were Jay Scott (Paul in *Grave of the Vampire*) and two actors who would go on to become directors themselves, Jim Feaze (who made *Psycho from Texas*) and Roger Genay, director of the sexploitation biker film *Steazn Rider*. Back in the cinematographer's chair was *The Farmer's Other Daughter* DP Paul Hipp (like DiSomma a friend of the Hayes family), who went on to shoot *The Hang-Up*, *Grave of the Vampire*, and *Garden of the Dead* plus numerous horror films for other directors, including *Broad and Lace*, *Seven Times Five*, *Psycho from Texas* and *The Boogens*. Hipp received co-producer credit on *Fandango*, along with Henning Schellcrup, himself a cinematographer responsible for shooting movie horrors like *Kiss of the Tarantula*, *Curse of the Headless Horseman* and *Silent Night, Deadly Night*. Schellcrup also became a regular DP for Schick.





In this last photo
 of *Fandango*
 the front row, with his
 beautiful partners

Fandango



Sunn Classic Pictures in the 1970s, shooting their patent brand of earnest docu-dramas for producer-director Charles Seiler. Ellen Hayes recalls: "Paul and Hennig were good friends of John's who worked with him on early projects. They were cinematographers he met when working at NASA as a director in the film department for the Apollo project. I believe he got Daniel [DiSomma] a job there, too."

For all the interesting credits, there's not a lot going on in *Fandango*. With his workers fighting and drinking too much, Wild West mining foreman Dan Murphy (Whitworth) takes two employees, Sam (Marland Proctor) and Billy (Jay Scott), to Fandango's, a bar/inn/whorehouse. He asks Madame Mona, an old flame, for a wagon full of girls to take back to his brawling workers in order to soothe industrial relations. Mona allows him to choose the cream of the crop, accompanying the cream herself to Murphy's remote mining encampment. However, Dan has made an enemy of local villain Mack Muligan (Sebastian Gregory). Muligan, a mean-spirited varmint who wears a leather patch to conceal his mutilated nose, mobilizes a gang to ambush Mona's pussy posse. Sam's favourite working girl, Pauline (Donna Stanley), is gang-raped during the raid, and another girl is shot, but the attack is repelled and the party continues on their way. Once at the camp, the good-time girls are put to work, then—after a few nights' fun and frolics—they're chaperoned back to town. On the return journey, Muligan strikes again, this time killing Billy and injuring Sam and Murphy. Thinking he's won the day, Muligan begins a slovenly sex attack on the assembled whores but pays for his crimes when the girls descend upon him and skewer him with their hairpins. The story ends with Sam and Pauline married and Murphy hinting that the mine may soon be exhausted, leaving him free to get back together with Mona.



Fandango is a minor effort, a sentimental fantasy where hookers are happy and even the odd rape here and there doesn't spoil the fun. In fact the only titmules we see are employees of Madame Mona, lending a literal twist to the phrase 'all women are whores'. There's a general lack of characterisation, and the theatrical thrust for psychodrama is far less apparent here than in Hayes's previous films. When Pauline is gang-raped we can just about accept the proposition that she's escaped trauma because her line of work mutes her—but it's a bit harder to swallow when soppy Sam seems not only unfazed but blandly accepting of his new girl's molestation. It's a failing of the script that Sam doesn't get to take revenge on the gang, instead being shot in the leg and sidelined during the final gunfight. Sebastian Gregory is a suitably scurvy villain, although his broad, supposedly 'Irish' accent frequently veers South to the Caribbean. Other cast-members make an effort, but without a decent script to chew on they rarely stand out. Hayes manages a few token flickers of creativity, such as the cut from a hanged man's thrashing legs to a high-kicking floozy hoofing the Charleston, but *Fandango* is thin gruel for film fans, except for those who can forgive a movie anything. If the female cast reveal their breasts. Even then, there's not much incentive to pinch your trouser-vent: made in 1969, the film plays safe, with tits and ass permissible but full-frontal male or female nudity verboten.⁷ At least the film will titillate Charles Manson groupies: it was filmed on the Spahn Ranch, with a date-line that puts it at the crest of the Family's helter-skelter.

Cady and Hayes made three 'Clover' films in 1969. The most 'respectable' of them was *The Cut-Throats*, which Hayes put out under his own name. It concerns a Captain who recruits five American soldiers, dubbed 'The Cut-Throats', to capture battle plans from a German stronghold—however, his real motive is to steal a cache of jewels plundered by the Nazis. The enemy soldiers are gunned down, but then the film shifts into softcore sexploitation: the beautiful women of the compound seduce the Cut-Throats, commencing their fiendish plan with a sexy stage show. Prominent among the girls is softcore queen Uschi Digard, whose more than eighty screen credits include a few of the horror persuasion. Ron Garcia's sex-horror weirdy *The Tin Box* and his pro-monogamy distric *Swingers Maxxwell* Kentucky Jones's *The Manson Massacre* (in which Uschi plays Charlie's Mum!), Brianne Murphy's *Blood Sabbath*, starring Dyanne Thorne; Don Edmonds's *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* and its sequel *Ilsa, Harlem Keeper of the Oil Sheik*.

also with Dyanne Thorne; and Ray Nadeau's dire *The Beauties and the Beasts*. *The Cut-Throats* is set during the Second World War, but that's about all it shares with Hayes's previous war movie *Shen Shock*, which at least had a decent script. Here the scenario is indifferently explored, with softcore romping in place of characterisation. For some reason about a third of the film is without music, which makes the proceedings feel even more threadbare. If this was the only John Hayes film I'd seen, I wouldn't bother looking for more. There are a handful of mildly salacious sex scenes,

suppose, including one that takes place between an American soldier and a German girl in a bedroom festooned with Nazi swastikas. On the whole, though, this is little better than *Fandango*, certainly no match for *Help Wanted Female*, and is not recommended.

For the other two Clover films in '69, Hayes employed his Harold Perkins pseudonym. One of them, *Alimony Lovers*, is possibly the most obscure and hard-to-trace of his entire career. No one seems to have recorded their thoughts on this film, nor any plot information, save for a meagre tally of cast and crew. It does at least feature two names familiar from many of the Clover titles: make-up artist Ruth Lyons (who turns up in the credits for *Help Wanted Female*, and the later *Baby Rosemary*), and cinematographer John Lyons, who shot all three.

Fortunately, we know a little more about *Baby Vickie*: Hayes/Perkins's third film in '69. It's a morbid tale about a sexually-repressed young woman, Vickie (Sharon Matt), who plays out sexual fantasies with the dummies in her father's tailor shop. Rejecting Steve (Bill Moore), the man her parents (Will Gary and Dana Raven) approve of, Vickie heads for the waterfront, where she is beaten and raped by Tony (Sebastian Gregory). Her parents cover up their daughter's disgrace by arranging a marriage with Steve. A year later, after Vickie and Steve are married, the deeply disturbed bride returns to the waterfront, seeking another 'tryst' with the rapist. Elusive as yet on video and DVD, this may well emerge one day as another Hayes classic.

The Hang-Up, released in 1970 as a John Hayes film, is distinguished by an *outré* plot involving a cold, moralistic cop, Bob Walsh (Sebastian Gregory), who goes undercover as a cross-dresser to apprehend phoney detectives suspected of shaking down the clientele of a transvestite bar. Far from being sympathetic to the plight of blackmailed transvestites, the homophobic Walsh views the cross-dressing scene with undisguised contempt. When his landlady speculates that his work must be very glamorous, he snaps,

"I catch queers, Mrs Howard [] homosexuals, transvestites, child-molesters, pimps, pushers, whores." Raising a whorehouse on another assignment, he falls foul of Perano, a wealthy sleazebag à la Hugh Hefner. Perano, working for a rich transvestite-lover, Kiljan, whom Walsh offended during the earlier raid by calling him a pervert, sets up an underage honey-trap with a seventeen-year-old hooker called Angel (Sharon Matt, from *Baby Vickie*): the glibbie Walsh falls for her, hook, line and sinker. Perano reveals the sting during a free love orgy in the woods, to which Angel has lured Walsh. As smirking hippies snap photos of the naked cop in flagrante, Perano explains that Angel has been in on the scheme all along. Perano's price for the kinky maps is for Walsh to clear Kiljan of involvement in the transvestite scene. Later that night, furious with Angel, Walsh gets drunk and rapes her on an open window-ledge ("I'm gonna show you what rape's really like"), then sets about extricating himself from the blackmail scheme.

Did Paul Schrader see this movie? Some of the similarities to *Taxi Driver* are uncanny. Walsh's litanies about hatred of perversion are a virtual trigger for Travis Bickle's musings, and when Walsh decides to rescue Angel from the imminent vice-bust because he believes she's an innocent in need of his protection, we see the relationship between Travis and his in nascent form. True, Walsh is a cop, not a psychotic drifter; but then, as Harvey Keitel's pimp observes in *Taxi Driver*, Travis sure as hell *looks* like a cop!

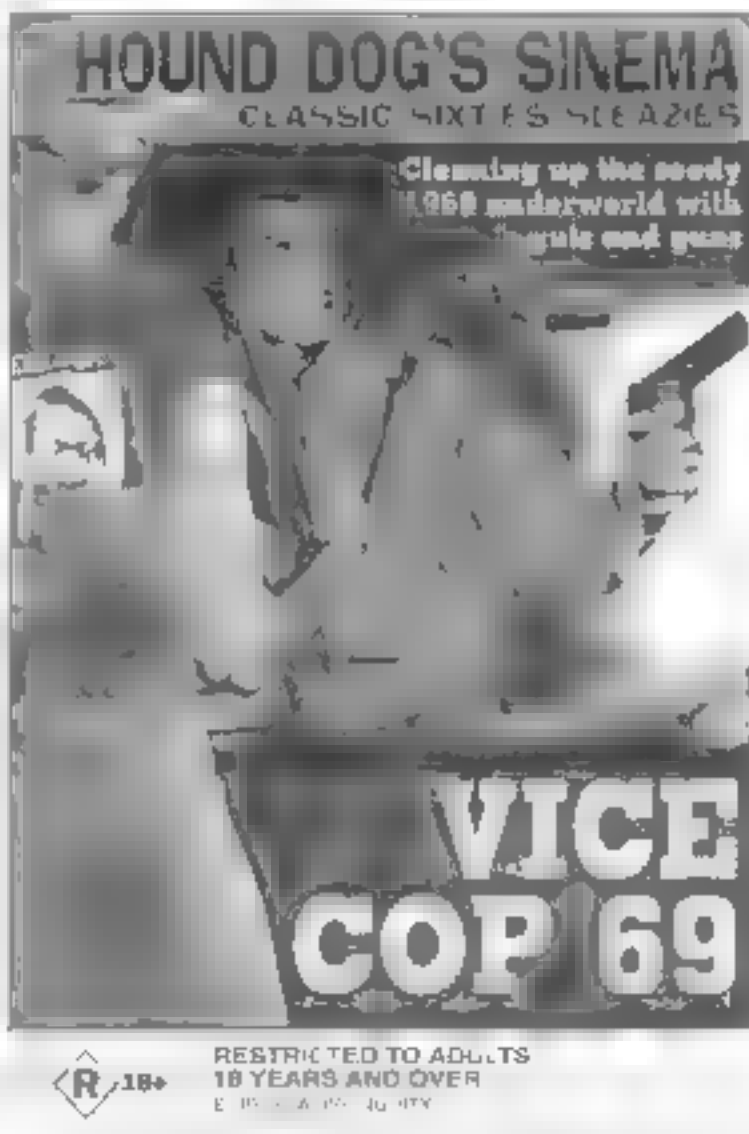
The 'hang-up' of the title is of course Walsh's bad attitude to sexual difference, and his inability to love. However, when he falls for Angel/Lori, he seems to be entering a thaw. The film then plays a dangerous game by invoking sympathy for Walsh after he's been betrayed. Perano and Kiljan are associated with corruption, using their wealth and social standing for nefarious ends, while Walsh is made to look like a poor unfortunate, trapped in a blackmail scheme just as he was starting to emerge as a nice guy. Even his explosive sexual attack on Lori is forgiven by Lori herself, who accepts the rape as punishment for betrayal. As Lori lies dying in a car wreck caused by Walsh, she denies to police that Walsh had sex with her, thus frustrating Perano's hold over him. (And it's an interesting choice of name for this villain, considering that the Perano family were notorious Mafia kingpins of the porno film industry.) Walsh is left a broken man, having lost the girl he loved, and realising she loved him too despite her involvement in the blackmail scheme (shades of *North By Northwest*). With no further dialogue to address Walsh's contempt, we're left with a homophobic bigot unlucky in love: not for me, the most compelling candidate for tragic anti-hero. *The Hang-Up* also suffers from an identical flaw to the earlier *Help Wanted Female*: languid jazz muzak that wafts through the film without rhyme or reason, where a more supportive score



US promo sheet for *The Hang-Up*



Australian video cover for the same film, featuring no images from the film (released in that country as *Vice Cop 69*)



RESTRICTED TO ADULTS
18 YEARS AND OVER
E 18+ (A 18+ RATING)

would have given things a lift. 'Sebastian Gregory' though is always compelling as the hard-nut puritan Walsh, giving us a very different performance to his murderous fratrikop in *Help Wanted Female*. He invests the film with enough edge to counteract Hayes's miscalculations (there's a particularly soppy scene in which Walsh runs with horses through lush fields, representing his new-found freedom with 'Angel'). The rest of the cast are unremarkable, although it's worth mentioning an appearance, in drag, by Erik Stern, star of the Mike Angel (Don Jones) horror/wacky *The Love Butcher*.

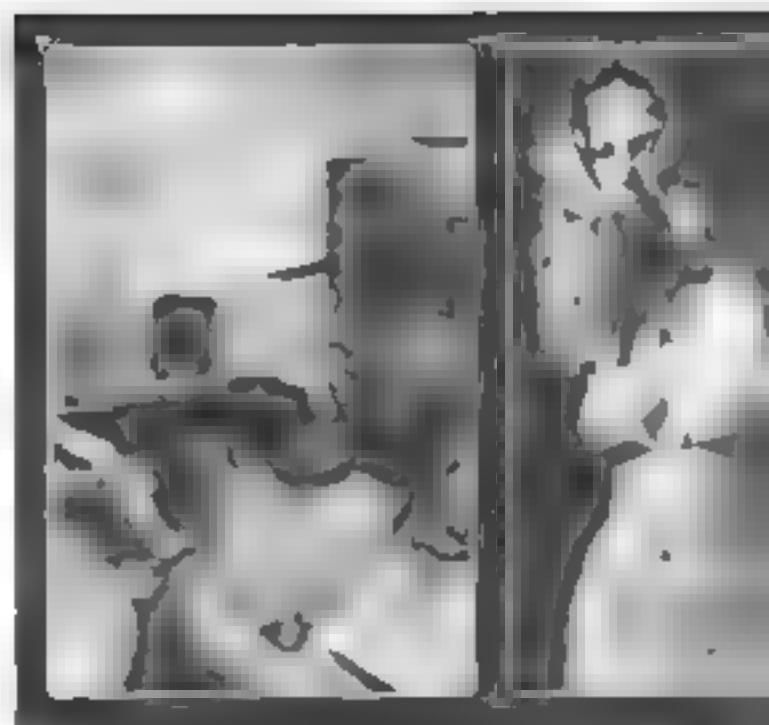
Sweet Trash (1970) is, like *Alimony Lovers*, a mystery title in the Hayes filmography. According to the American Film Institute Catalog, it was a Clover project with Dan Cady. The Catalog entry describes the sorry tale of an honest New York dockworker Michael Donovan, unwittingly sucked into the loan shark business through his association with hookers and shady businessmen. He turns, catastrophically, to drink, unable to cope with the double-dealing life in which he's mired. Such a story has similarities to the earlier Hayes triumph *Five Minutes to Love*, with its focus on a decent man sucked into criminality. However, the *New York Times*'s online film review disabuses claims that the AFI entry is erroneous, and asserts that *Sweet Trash* is actually an alternative title for *The Hung Up*: a claim given extra credibility by the US Copyright Office's entry for *Sweet Trash*, which lists its alternative title as *The Hung Up* – a likely misnomer. I don't know if we'll ever learn more about Michael Donovan's misfortunes in the loan shark business, but as an outline it sounds authentically Hayes-esque.

Vampires, Gold-Diggers, and the Collapse of Clover

It's here, at least fourteen films into his career, that we see John Hayes's first full-blooded contribution to the horror genre: a dark, despairing tale of childhood trauma and madness best known today as *Dream to End* (see review). It stars Michael Pataki, who would remain friends with Hayes for several years, and (in a small part) Marc Lawrence, famed for his gangster roles in the classic Hollywood cinema of the thirties and forties.

All the Loving in Norfolk was Hayes's fourth movie that year and the third to be produced by Clover Films. Cindy (Mady Maguire), a naive young mountain woman, and her cousin Zeb (Jay Scott) head for the big city, but their dreams lead only to heartache. Cindy becomes a prostitute, seducing her cousin when she discovers that he's having an affair with the daughter of his boss. Another of Hayes's least known films, it remains very hard to elaborate beyond this brief synopsis.

After *Grave of the Vampire* and *Garden of the Dead* in 1972 (see reviews), Hayes made *The Sensuous Manicured* (1974), a phenomenally obscure title starring Frances Buchanan, Alberta Steinberg and Penny Walters (aka Dyanne Thorne), about which little is else known. In the same year he turned to comedy action melodrama with *Mama's Dirty Girls* (1974), which received much better distribution. The film opens with nineteen-year-old sex kitten Becky (Candice Rialson) squeezing into a skimpy bikini before heading out to the pool where a fat, wealthy pantingly attentive middle-aged man (Johnny Dennis) serves her drinks. Becky teases the slob to the limit, until finally he tries to rape her – at which point Becky's mother, 'Mama Love' (Gloria Grahame) arrives to reveal that the man molesting her daughter is her newly-wed husband! In exchange for the attack going unreported, hubby writes a full



confession of his crime. This admission is then used as a suicide note, after Mama, Becky and oldest daughter Addie (Sandra Currie) slash the fellow's wrists in the shower. Mama and her two oldest daughters have used their ploy before: preying on wealthy men, marrying and then murdering them for their inheritances. As Mama explains,

"I mean only a man, but property is security." Youngest of the brood, Candy (Mary Stoddard), is the only one not in on the scam. The next intended victim is motel owner Harold (Paul Lambert) but unbeknownst to the conniving family Harold already drowned his first wife to collect *her* inheritance – and intends to do the same to Mama.

With frequent near-nudity from Rialson and Currie, and a script that leans more on the burlesque than the nastiness of the premise, the film comes across as a black comic variant on the classic *femme fatale* narrative. Headline star Gloria Grahame, who won Best Actress Oscar for *The Bad and the Beautiful* in 1952, was enjoying a late bloom in seventies B-pictures, playing hard-hearted bitches in films like this and Philip Clabert's *Blood and Lace* for AIP, as well as appearing in Michael Pataki's creepy *Mansion of the Doomed* and Armand Weston's effective haunted whorehouse tale *The Vesting*. Her role here as a matriarch at war with family life is *appropriate* given that Grahame married both Nicholas Ray (the movie director and then later his son Tony – her former stepson!) According to Ellen Hayes, the actress was a real trouper, very co-operative to the production, but formidable: a woman who lifted weights every morning when filming on location! She's supported well by pretty Candice Rialson who essays another great bitch-kitten role to set alongside her man-raping 'Bonnie' in Raphael Nussbaum's *Pets*.

Mama's Dirty Girls was not released by Clover, but instead by Premiere Releasing (who distributed *The Manhandlers*, *Swinging Harmaids* and imports like Lucio Fulci's *The Challenge to White Fang*). Sadly, Hayes's relationship with Daniel Cady had foundered after thirteen years, with a dispute over money. Ellen Hayes explains how the rift with Cady came about. "John did everything involved with production. He wrote, directed, edited, story, sound and music, cut negative and could punch-hit as photographer and sound recordist. The one area in which he had no interest or expertise was finance, and this led directly to his conflict with Dan Cady and the demise of Clover. Also, there were differences between the two on the direction they wanted to take the company."⁸

Baby Rosemary

With Clover now defunct, Hayes directed films for other low-budget indie producers, as well as continuing his Harold Perkins career with companies such as Essex Pictures, porno specialists responsible for nuggets like *Sex World* (Anthony Spinelli's 1978 porn take on *Westworld*). In 1979, picking up a thread from his earlier film *Baby Vickie*, he made *Baby Rosemary*, a brutal sex drama that stands as one of his most disturbing films, with strong echoes of the film's trauma theme that incessantly coloured his career. Long-standing friend and actor Daniel DeSodima began work on the film as sound-man, but dropped out, finding the unrelenting pornographic focus too depressing. One has to sympathise: the film is certainly a million miles away from the light-hearted sex satire of DeSodima's own foray into sexploitation, *Come One Come All*. Squeamishness aside, though, this was to prove a surprisingly powerful, arresting piece of work. Earlier films can claim to be better made, hedged with the virtues of Hayes's theatrical background, but if there's an infernal core to his filmmaking, *Baby*

Rosemary Price (Sharon Thorpe) is a sexually tormented and confused young woman who is unable to settle down with a man. Her mother died when she was very young and her alcoholic father put her in an orphanage, only visiting her occasionally ("It was such a nightmare to be a child. Now I'm the adult, I do what I want."). When her current lover John (John Leslie, John Nuzzo) announces that he's going to join the police force and wants to move in with her, Rosemary turns him down flat ("Sex is always so degrading. So unclear."). She tells him she's going to get a job as a teacher and will be too busy to see him any more, then leaves to seek solace with a hooker called Eunice (Leslie Boyce), whom he addresses as "Rosemary" while orally worshipping her ass on the stairs of her skanky apartment block. Rosemary visits a flophouse where she believes her father still lives (though she hasn't seen him for several years). Finding he's not there, she waits in his room. A young couple, Tate (Monique Cardin aka Samantha King) and Mick (Ken Cotton), let themselves in, claiming to be her father's friends. After taunting her with pornographic photographs they claim were taken by her father, the couple subject her to a bisexual rape at knifepoint ("Suck that cunt or you're dead!"). The story then jumps forward two years. John, now a police officer, approaches Rosemary and informs her that her father has died. However, she's emotionally distant and shows little interest. She introduces him to two of her students, Tracy and Marsha, who are members of "an occult group that believes that all of life is sexual." Rosemary and John, accompanied by Tracy and Marsha, attend a funeral home to see Rosemary's father in his coffin. Tracy is unimpressed by the undertaker's soliloquy about death and rebirth ("All that stuff about a human turning into a flower? It's bullshit."). The two girls demonstrate their take on death by seducing the undertaker (John Seetian) into a threesome. John tries to reawaken his relationship with Rosemary but she can't relax with him in bed. After a dysfunctional bedroom tussle in which Rosemary makes John come without allowing him to penetrate her, she streaks off back to her father's old flophouse and voluntarily has sex with Mick, the man who raped her before, achieving her only orgasm of the film during rough, verbally abusive sex. In an only-in-the-seventies' twist, the rapist turns sweet on her, cleans up his

act, gets a job, promises to quit drinking and buys her frilly underwear, acting like a bashful schoolboy ("I can't never find a girl like you. Clean, and, you know, decent."). Unfortunately, it doesn't work out – as soon as love is involved, Rosemary turns frigid ("What's wrong?" "I don't know – it's different"). The rejection flips lover-boy back into rapist-seum mode, but his plans for an evening of degradation ("I'm gonna sit here and drink my beer – maybe when I've had enough I'm gonna piss it all up your nose, you fuckin' cunt.") are forestalled by the arrival of John, looking for Rosemary. A fight ensues – Mick knocks John out cold and Rosemary grabs John's police pistol, however she is unable to shoot. Mick leaves, swearing vengeance on Rosemary ("The next time I catch you alone I'm gonna fuck you over real bad. And when I'm through fuckin' with ya – I'm gonna kill ya"). John agrees to Rosemary's plea not to report the incident, but extricates himself from Rosemary when she tries to rekindle their relationship. Her repeated frustration of his desires has finally dampened his ardour. After a lesbian threesome with Tracy and Marsha, Rosemary hears her father's voice imploring her ("Rosemary, help me. Don't let them hurt me. I'm alive."). She enters the funeral parlour and sits down in front of the open coffin. As dry ice wafts everywhere, all the characters in the film – John and Eunice, Tracy and Marsha, Mick and Tate the Undertaker – enter the room and draw Rosemary into a gangbang in front of her father's casket. The film ends on a shot of Rosemary clawing her way out of a morass of naked bodies and reaching out in despair to the corpse, crying, "Daddy? Take me away from this place."

This is one hellishly mixed up film. Sombre, even sensitive moments jostle with some of the harshest clichés of seventies porn, in a compelling but relentlessly grim story that seesaws between bad-taste shocks and genuine psychological honesty. The problem is that the film's



Images from *Baby Rosemary*

Mick (Ken Cotton)

Rosemary (Sharon Thorpe) can't

Sinister visions at the funeral

John tries to get Eunice gets into bed

John Seetian
John Seetian



There is NOTHING
She Wouldn't Do
To Fulfill Her
Secret
Sexual Fantasies

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CANDIDA ROYALLE • JOHN LESLIE DUPRE
and KEN COTTON

screenplay by RUTH PRICE • produced by BILL STEELE • directed by HOWARD PERKING

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moral compass (if I dare to presume such a thing) is newly steamrolled up by the graphic, aggressive sex and pungent verbal hostility, swamping the depiction of a traumatized woman in prurient close-ups and raw, pornographic spectacle.

In recent years, art-house movies like Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999), Virginie Despentes's *Baise-moi* (2000) and Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs* (2004) have once again raised the issue of whether film as a narrative art can sustain pornographic imagery. Earlier art-house hits like *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) are usually cited as examples of how this can work, but it's rare that anyone gives credit to the porno industry itself for experimenting with the same

idea from the reverse angle. So, can a porno film also deal seriously with psychological portraiture? On the evidence of a film like this it's harder to dismiss than you might think, despite what the trade paper *Variety* (who mocked its "ludicrous stab at plot narrative") had to say. The porno template for such adventures is often assumed to be Gerant Damiano's downbeat, existential *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973), but a look at the pre-hardcore nudies and roughies reveals that Hayes, like James Bryan and Don Jones, was already toying with darker character-driven sex stories and looking to make them more and more graphic (If Hayes had made *Help Wanted Female* four years later, it could have been an S&M nightmare to rival the films of Zebedy Colt. *The Devil in Miss Jones*, while undeniably impressive, was simply part of a continuum: Hayes was already seeking a blend of gritty psychological realism and pornography, even before Damiano's hit went mainstream.

What is most haunting about *Baby Rosemary* is the way Hayes once again draws on aspects of his troubled family background for material. The suggestion is that Rosemary was abused in the orphanage where her father left her, and this combination of traumatic sexual experience and parental abandonment has ruined her chances of emotional and sexual happiness, leading, in the end, to madness. Brutal, abusive sex is her only carnal satisfaction, while affection—even from a one-time rapist—turns her frigid. It is certainly not for me to speculate any further as to the links, if any, between Rosemary and Hayes's unfortunate sister, but it is clear that he felt compelled to explore his feelings on the subject even here, in a setting that many would consider hopelessly debased.

By drawing parallels from his own life experience, Hayes makes *Baby Rosemary* resonate with emotional honesty, but he also generates cross-currents, with some misogynistic scenes that confuse the film's moral centre. When the previously sympathetic, apparently sweet-natured John has sex with the hooker Eunice, his surrogate Rosemary, his sexual adoration of her asshole initially casts him as the lovelorn victim. However, the sex then swivels back to a contradictory set-up with the male in the traditional power role: John fucks Eunice, cums over her face and leaves her frustrated, denied her own orgasm. The scene ends up embracing the macho notion that hookers are nymphs who can be left gasping for more, instead of the far more honest depiction that would have shown Eunice able to turn her desire on and off like a faucet. By showing her plaintively calling after the departing "John" whilst frigging herself off on the stairs, the scene panders to male fantasies of total control over the sexual act. It's as if the earlier sexual submission has to be assuaged, by gestures like John dismissively tossing money at Eunice as he finishes. However, after he's departed, we see Eunice cease masturbating, and mutter incredulously to herself, "*Christ. What a way to make a fucking living!*" before staggering back up to her room complaining about her aching back. Considering that John and Eunice later became a couple, with the hooker merging raw sex and emotional commitment in a way Rosemary could not, John's macho trip in the stairwell stands out like a sore, ahem, thumb. Perhaps the actor John Leslie, a big name in porno at the time, took control of the power dynamic as the camera rolled, against the grain of the script, and Hayes felt obliged to keep his star's reaction in the film?

And then there's the rape scene. In psychological terms poor abused Rosemary might conceivably respond to being raped by "getting into it." Not that she does with any great

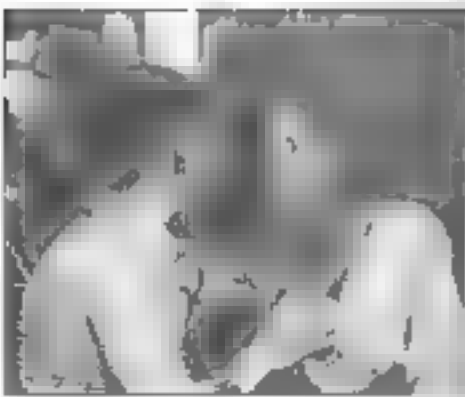
enthusiasm – has to be noted: she exudes an attitude of, well, I'm going to happen you may as well ride with it. The issue is not one of fictive plausibility – the problem lies in the way we're invited to watch. As feminist critics would explain in far more detail, the placement of the camera and use of film style are crucial. They can facilitate amoral complicity or mindless complicity (two very different attitudes, neither of which require critical engagement with the morality of the camera), or thirdly, a moral engagement with the image (which asks how we may detach our point of view from complicity with the rapists). In this case, I can see no evidence that Hayes intended to distance the viewer from the rapists' sexual pleasure. The rape scene is a pure spectacle of cruelty, and we are invited to the least either as casual voyeurs mindful of our amoral enjoyment, or mindless voyeurs for whom the question is too complicated to care about. In comparison to the rigorous detachment of Meir Zarch's *I Spat on Your Grave*, Hayes treats the rape as just a rougher-than-average sex scene.

The most shocking aspect of the rape is not visual, it's verbal. In fact, the language throughout is frequently crude and gleefully abusive. This is one of the strengths of the film. I've quoted a few examples, but you have to watch *Babe Rosemary*, in order to appreciate the way that Hayes plays hardball with the audience through obscene, telling, stylistic dialogue. Even if the sexual politics of the era elude the director, he maintains a frank, unflinchingly honest grip on vernacular. Verbal abuse tells us more about the speaker than the spoken-to, and Hayes the theatre-lover still knows how to shorthand his characters' identities through a few well-chosen words, even in this unpromising locale. *Babe Rosemary* is one of Hayes's best films, but it's also one of his most problematic, revealing a terrible cynicism that plays strangely against the compassion to be found elsewhere in his work.

Genre-hopping

After a brief stint editing a sex comedy called *The Beach Tube Strikes Again* (1977) for roughie specialist Lee Frost, who'd guested as an actor in *Garden of the Dead*, Hayes turned for the first and last time to sci-fi for *End of the World*, a star vehicle (generally regarded as a dud). One question that never passes is the exploitation trick of hiring older 'names', even if only for just one day – which is how *End of the World*'s roster of talent was conceived. (Quentin Tarantino's knack of rediscovering out-of-favour actors upgrades the process, which used to be confined to the B and C lists). *End of the World* was made in 1977 for producer and soon-to-be low-budget mogul Charles Band, and stars perhaps the most prestigious acting talents Hayes had worked with: Christopher Lee, Dean Jagger and Sue Lyon. Not that it was made easier by the presence of greatness. Eileen Hayes says, "I remember John being amused that Mr Lee rarely blinked, and one bit of direction would often be, 'All right Christopher, now blink'". In 1978, after a bland 'Harold Perkins' sex film for Essex Pictures called *Hot Lunch*, starring Juliet Anderson and Desree Cousteau, and notable only for its unusual theme of strife and misery, Hayes made the erotic melodrama *Judith Babysitter* for Group 1, a daring distribution house responsible for hustling Silvio Amadio's *Amuck!*, Richard Robinson's *Poor Pretty Eddie*, and Mario Caiano's *Adult Love Camp 27* onto the sleaze theatre audiences of America. This downbeat sex drama

Adapted: "She's Pure Temptation" revisits the cautionary tale of Hayes's 90th work with its casual, amoral, underage female lead causing merry hell in the lives of sex-hungry mankind. It was followed in 1979 by *Up Yours*, which Hayes co-directed with writer Lowell Ruess. This "rockin' comedy" as the subtitle has it, was produced and co-written by Chris Warfield for Warfield's own Lima Productions, and features walk-ons by Belinda Balaski, Ryder and Warfield themselves, and Warfield's buddy B-movie stalwart George "Buck" Flower. A compendium of woeful skits, *Up Yours* wants a piece of the *Kentucky Fried Movie* action, but the gags are so limp and artlessly protracted you squirm instead of laughing. I did find the deranged concert amusing, simply because it's so tacky: a living, speaking apartment block, as represented by an actress (Cindy Morgan) superimposed



A scene from 'Up Yours' with George 'Buck' Flower and Cindy Morgan

Promo still for Hayes's *End of the World*



over the brickwork, delivers cutesy homilies that segue between stories tenuously linked to the building, to the accompaniment of quirky music that sounds lifted from the seventies TV hit *Soap*. Essentially though, this is the pits. No one sets out to make a bad film, especially a bad comedy, so we must assume that either comedy simply wasn't Hayes's métier, or more likely, that he had little actual control over what went into the script. After all, he didn't write this one. Edward Ryder and Chris Warfield must take the rap there. At least the film offers us several chances to see Hayes himself, including an appearance as a cop in a barbers' shop, and later as a pompous gentleman refusing to give money to a beggar played by George Buck Flower. "Neither a borrower, nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend" - William Shakespeare, "the gentleman says, to which the beggar responds, "Fuck you" - Tennessee Williams." If I tell you this is one of the funniest scenes, you'll know what to do you ever see this tape in a video sale. The real problem is that simple one-liners are being set up as sketches, stretching the jokes way too thin. For example, a cash-strapped man develops a taste for dog food. He later dies, we're told, but not from the dog food - he falls from the sofa and breaks his neck whilst trying to lick his own balls. Boom-boom! Except it takes five minutes to play out this scenario - and we don't get to see the guy licking his testicles either - surely an oversight in any comedy.

Dyanne Thorne of *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* fame appears in the film as a seductive manicurist, using the pseudonym Penny Walters (and leaving one wondering what the connection could be with the earlier obscure Hayes title *The Sensuous Manicurist* - could Thorne's scene in *Up Yours* be culled from the earlier picture?). Don Edmondi, Thorne's director on the first two *Ilsa* films, appears too, as a psychiatrist's patient looking at ink-blots who delivers the old "You're the one who drew the dirty pictures" gag, with Chris Warfield as the psychiatrist. In fact the cast is an exploitation-specialist smorgasbord: John Goff, Buck Flower's writing partner on *Drive-In Massacre* and Matt Cimber's collaborator on the screenplays for *Fake-Out* and *Butterfly* (and who played the abusive father in Cimber's *The Witch Who Came from the Sea*) turns up as The Devil, while Stafford Morgan, who also appears in *The Witch Who Came from the Sea* and Don Jones's *The Forest*, essays another couple of roles. You have to wade through an awful lot of rubbish to see them, but anyway, now you know.

The 1980s saw the pornographic movie world change beyond recognition, and although Hayes gave the New Video Order a shot (it's clear that his style was never going to make the transition from story-driven sex dramas to video-age smut. In 1982 he directed *Pleasure Zones*, as Harold Perkins' "This online description gives you a good idea of how times had changed. "Beautiful newcomer Rachel Dallas is our 'Pleasure Guide,' as she uses her incredible body as a sensuous living road map while she describes the ecstasy derived from the proper exercising of the *Pleasure Zones*. As her gentle hands lovingly fondle her magnificent breasts, expertly massaging herself into a state of sensual excitement, she takes us on a visual voyage. Thus begins an overwhelmingly erotic avalanche of visual stimulation that will leave you limp with ecstasy." Sixty minutes of fondling may take the viewer on a 'visual voyage' of some sort, but it doesn't make for cinema as such, and Hayes, whose roots were in psychological drama and the theatre, must have felt the game was up.

Back to the Theatre

After directing an episode of *Tales from the Darkside* called "The Madness Room", starring Stuart Whitman, and one more Harold Perkins' outing, comprising two segments of the 1983 multi-director porno film *Working Girls* (namely "Maie Hooker" and "Learning the Biz"), Hayes - and Harold Perkins' - retired from the film industry. Instead, he turned back to his first love, the theatre, staying active through the directors unit at the Actors Studio, and through Theater East in Los Angeles. His one-act play *The Front Room* was produced at Theater East as part of the 1987 Fringe Festival.

Hayes married Ellen, the sister of his second wife, in 1986. The two of them had been good friends ever since the mid-sixties, but their romantic relationship took off in 1983 when John helped Ellen through a serious illness. With a stable and loving relationship to rely upon, Hayes varied his endeavours and maintained numerous interests outside of the movies. He ran a catering business for a while and spent a lot of time studying the saxophone, listening to jazz and classical music, and rebuilding old pianos. In the nineties he learned to edit on computer and studied a variety of digital camera systems. He even re-opened Clover Films, with plans to write and direct short dramatic films on tape. His last produced drama was a half-hour piece called *The*

Urbanhood, with his friend Paul Carr as actor/producer. The themes were drawn, as so often, from his Irish American New York youth. He was planning to tighten and re-edit the result before becoming ill. He died of cancer in Burbank (California, on 21 August, 2000). He is survived by his wife Ellen, and two daughters from his first marriage, Alisha Shepard and Deborah Copher.

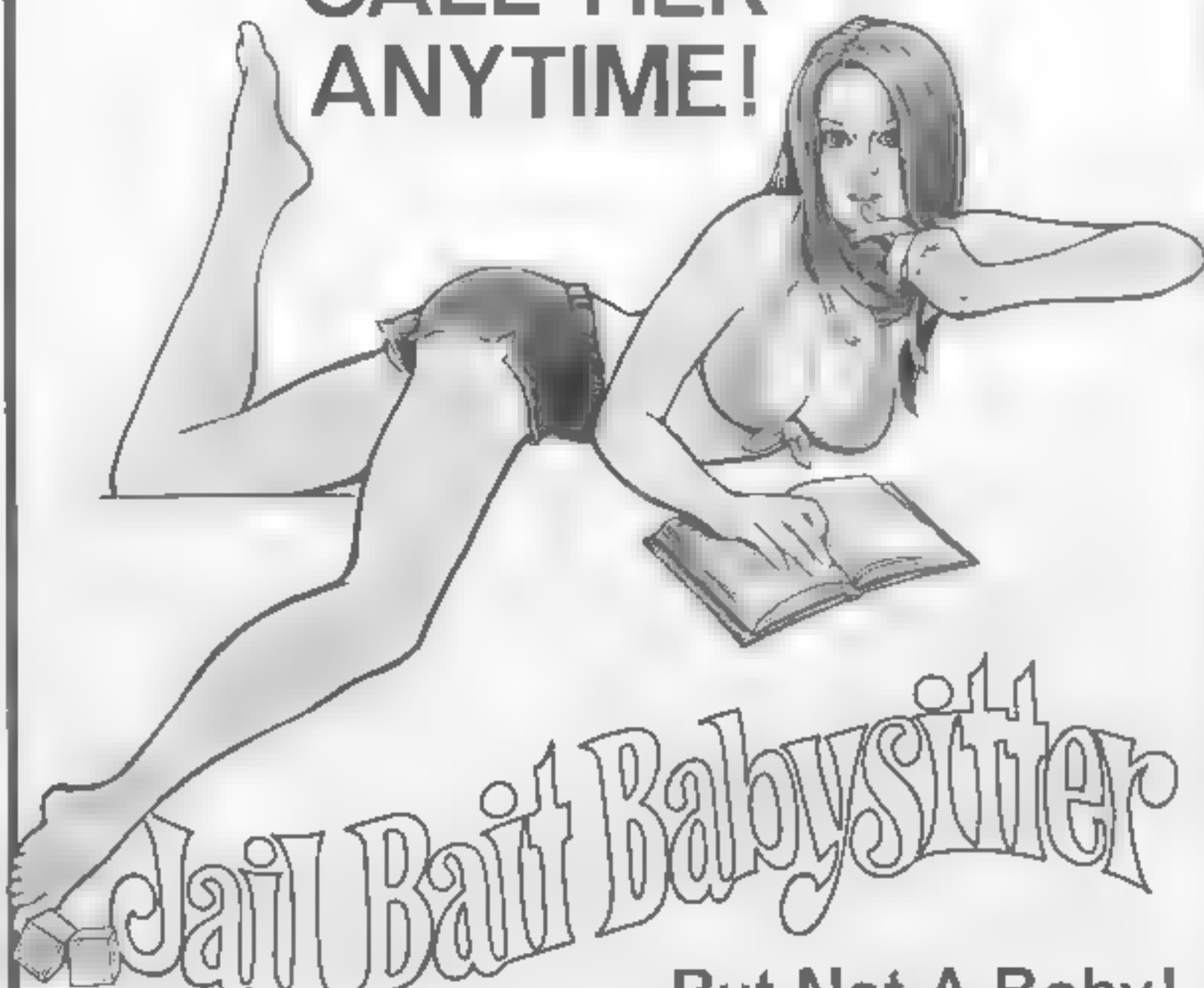
Ellen Hayes recalls, "John was fast and decisive as a director but always reshaped the rehearsal process most. He trusted actors and listened to their input but believed the director was ultimate dictator. His concentration was fierce and he believed total effort and loyalty were due every project, no matter what its artistic merit. If this sounds humourless, the opposite was true. He was a very funny man who didn't take himself too seriously. In writing he didn't like gags or one-liners, preferring situational humour. Jack Colvin, actor, director and acting teacher, was a close friend, having met John, I believe, at Theater East. They would schmooze for hours on the phone about movies, the theatre, vaudeville, burlesque, old songs and New York.¹⁰ Among the films John admired most were *The Entertainer*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Our Town* and *Laura* (for its photography). Good acting moved him emotionally. I once caught him with tears in his eyes watching a comedy. It was Glenn Close's performance in Altman's *Cooking's Fortune*."

Rue McClanahan also stresses Hayes's sense of humour. "During *She'll Shock* I remember him saying to me, 'You know, a lot of people come up to me and say, 'You're so authoritative. You never seem flustered. How do you do it?' I'll tell you how I do it, Rue - I stand there and I look into the distance and I look as if I'm thinking of something, like I'm planning the next shot' - all I'm really doing is looking like I'm planning the next shot! And it fools everybody because it looks like I know what I'm doing!'"

McClanahan was well aware that Hayes's humour was set against a background of personal trauma: "He'd had a difficult childhood, raised by his grandmother and his uncle. He wrote short stories that were funny but touching, sad. He was so disturbed and unsure of himself as a person because of his bad upbringing. His father died, whom he never loved

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CALL HER
ANYTIME!



But Not A Baby!

IN BLAZING COLOR - FROM EMPIRE RELEASING, INC

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John Hayes (top) and poster for one of Hayes's sex comedies *All the Lovin' Kinfolk* (1970)

with him and he took it very hard, then his mother Kate died, whom he was very fond of, and he took that very hard too. I visited him and Ellen in Hollywood every time I went out there to do something, and the last time I visited was about a year before he died of cancer. He was obviously very weak and rather frightened, because it was not curable. I'd had breast cancer by then, and I tried to boost him up and explain that he was going to get better. The last time I saw him he was standing in his sitting room with Ellen as I was leaving, and he had a big smile on his face, as he often did. He was a wonderful man.

John Hayes was a tireless lover of cinema whose best work has frequently been either ignored or lost in the commercial shuffle, with only his more avowedly cultish films, the horror titles, tending to attract attention. I hope this chapter has shown that there are many more Hayes films deserving of scrutiny. Personally I find that with none of his feature films still to see, I have not yet assuaged my curiosity about the man and his work. Perhaps this chapter will serve as a springboard for other writers, who will eventually add these tantalising missing titles to their own studies. And for horror fans who, like me, love *Grave of the Vampire* and *Dream No Evil*, the career of John Hayes provides a startling example of the complex life stories that can lie behind those battered old VHS tapes.



¹ *Exit As a Man* by Cauder W. Hingham: workshop performances 10 and 17 May and 11 June 1953. Actors Studio. Cast: James Dean in a non-speaking role as a scribe; also Ben Gazzara, Arthur Storch, Williams Smithers, Albert Salmi, Anthony Franciosa, Peter Mark Richman. Director: Jack Garfield. As listed in Va. Holley's book *James Dean: The Biography*.

² Hartweg was on his way from Las Vegas to New York one night, as a passenger in a friend's car, when the driver fell asleep at the wheel. In the ensuing crash, Hartweg was thrown from the car

and broke his back; he was a paraplegic from then on. 'He has been on his way for an interview,' McElanahan sighs. 'His sister told me I'm pretty confident that Norman was being considered for the position of drama critic at the *New Republic* magazine, and my memory is that he was heading East to explore this possibility. The others in the crash weren't even injured. He went through a lot of therapy after that and became very independent in his wheelchair. He lived with me for six weeks in L.A., during my fourth marriage, and my husband did not take to that at all! But by then I was thinking of Norman as my best friend.'

³ The film came out on tape in a sepia-toned version in the USA from Patagon Video.

⁴ Rue refers to her third husband Peter DiMeco solely in 'The Nation' and refuses to speak his name.

⁵ Rue McElanahan thinks it was closer to 1964.

⁶ 'I know John, Paul Gripp and Henning Schellerup did a film on the original group of astronauts, but I don't know the title.' *ibid.* 10.

⁷ The cover of *Something Weird* cassette promises seventy-nine minutes but the actual print runs barely seventy, so perhaps the sex scenes were added in some versions.

⁸ Cady followed *Mama's Dirty Girls* with two black-and-white films, *Black Samson* and *Black Sappho*, both 1974, and *Kiss of the Tarantula* by Chris Munger in 1976.

⁹ The original title was probably *Up Your Lashers*, which is the name of the title song, and is referenced in the production company name set up for the project, The Lashder Film Co. The film appeared on the British video label Apex as *Up Yours*, with a title card slipped over the opening credits to back it up. The title *Up Yours: A Rockin' Comedy* is harder to attribute specifically.

¹⁰ Cochin was an actor in TV's *The Incredible Hulk*, in which he played the regular character of nosy reporter and Hulk-buster Jack Slocum.

JOHN HAYES: FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR	
Year	Title
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What Really Happened to Tony Vorno's Victims?

Daniel DiSomma on Victims

Victims (1977)

Paulie (Tony Vorno) is in trouble. He's coming apart. His shrink Dr. Russo (Jerome Guardino) believes hypnotherapy will tap the root of his problems, but for Paulie it's already too late. Every close encounter he has with the opposite sex costs another woman her life, while stirring up memories of his prostitute mother Paula (Lois Adams), who left him at the tender mercies of Sheila (Brandy Carson), a sexually abusive alcoholic hooker, and Charlie (Bud Greene), her far-from-tender pimp.

This deeply downbeat serial-killer tale never received an American release and sank without trace when released in Britain on the Video Unlimited label in the early '80s. It has been criminally neglected ever since. *Victims* has the studiously grimy ambience of Joseph Ellison's *Don't Go in the House* (1979) and the no-bullshit verisimilitude of John McNaughton's *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986) – it may be hard to find, but sourcing a copy should be a priority for anyone interested in low-budget, high-quality American horror.

Central to the film is a carefully-observed performance by actor-turned-director Daniel DiSomma. Describing his approach as "a composite psychological profile drawn from my interest in psychology and sensitivity to the subject," DiSomma offers a portrait of a man weakened by childhood trauma, a fragile vessel set to explode at any of life's frustrations. Bled under his pseudonym "Tony Vorno," DiSomma plays Paul/Paulie as a bad actor – in the American vernacular, someone whose mask of glib sincerity sets our nerves obscurely on edge. When the mask slips, Paulie lurches into madness, in a nervy, alarmingly plausible way that captures the enraged disappointment of a loser-turned-killer. When they come, the murders (although not especially graphic) have a grim intensity born not of lovingly detailed flesh wounds, but of palpable fear and fury.

The backbone of *Victims* is its cast, and their experience in Los Angeles theatre shines through in scene after scene. The film suffers none of the drawbacks one associates with low-budget film acting. Each and every part is played well; in particular, the key scenes between Paulie

and his female victims are fraught with ferocious tension and believability. *Victims* has none of the kitsch value you get from bad acting, and just as importantly there's no inappropriate grandstanding, of the sort you might expect from stage actors unaccustomed to the screen. Instead, DiSomma draws measured performances from his cast, giving what could have been just another psycho-killer movie much greater credibility.

The brain behind the backbone, so to speak, is DiSomma – as writer, director and star. He treads a fine line in the earlier scenes, with 'Paulie' coming across as both sad and rather comical. We see him driving around the sleazier streets of L.A., fulminating under his breath about the permissive evils to which he's clearly drawn, like a middle-aged, deglamorised Travis Bickle. Spying a cop (James Pascucci), shaking down a passer-by, he sidles up, removes his sunglasses and winks conspiratorially, as if to congratulate the officer – before replacing his shades and striding into a sex store. Once inside, Paulie looks around, seething with the sort of hypocritically aroused moral ire that British readers will recognise as the *modus operandi* of the British tabloids, before haranguing the store-owner about the 'shit' he's peddling. Having made his point, he struts out with an absurd "I'll be back", underlining his threat with a handful of popcorn thrown, with comic pettiness, at the store owner.

But when Paulie encounters the *opposite sex*, we see what a danger he really is, and the smile is wiped from our faces. *Victims* shares little with other psycho-horror films: there are no virginal "final girls" here. DiSomma treats all the female characters equally and makes no moralistic connection between their career choices and their fates. They're all just trying to make a living, and the whore who has to deal professionally with Paulie's hair-trigger violence is treated with as much sympathy as the unfortunate psychiatrist's secretary (Lenore Stevens) who finds herself stuck alone with him during her dinner break, or the luckless housewife (Patsy Sabline) renting out a room in her pleasant, sunny home. Perhaps the only difference between them is that the whore is harder to fool: since her work often brings her into contact with the dark side of masculinity, innately unfazed, if watchful, she plays

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along with Paulie's escalating violence, very little of which is actually sexual. She tries to manage it, contain it, to let him blow off so much until he hopefully leaves. The tension and sadness of the sequence comes from seeing this woman feel her way through the encounter, with a mixture of workaday familiarity and heartiness. She knows Paulie is dangerous, but sadly she needs the money. Perhaps he's more as dangerous as the last fraudloop; perhaps he's a big spender. It turns out that Paulie can't afford to pay, so he trashes the apartment, rips the woman's clothes, smacks her around, and generally runs up a bill before handing her a paltry fistful of cash, promising to cough the rest up later. The victim is just glad that he's gone—but she counts her blessing.

Paulie's attempted rape of Marianne, the psychiatrist's secretary, is quite honestly one of the most harrowing and realistic depictions of sexual assault that I've seen in the movies. Rather than showing rape from the point of view of the rapist, *Victims* shows the reverse angle—as Marianne finds herself trapped with a man she knows to be insane. Social awkwardness inhibits Marianne's ability to confront the situation, and the camera sides with her attempts to get rid of him without letting her fear show. The rape, when it comes, is nowhere near as graphic as *I Spent My Youth in the High Watermark* (the high watermark for sexual violence outside of pornography), but the psychological detail and pinpoint perfect acting still make us terrifyingly close to the situation. This is no exploration tease, no saucy fantasy. The horror is conveyed through naturalistic dialogue and skilled performances. Perhaps the reason this movie failed to find an audience was that it took too realistic an approach to something most buyers would prefer to market as exploitation.

Fittingly, *Victims* has a claustrophobic quality. The outside world only gets a look-in via a radio phone-in show heard from time to time in the background, debating such topics as whether women secretly want to be ravished. DiSomma underlines the hell within which his characters live by means of the global talk-radio format, a forum that offers itself as socially valuable when in fact it's their wallpaper for the terminally bored, or a meaningless corra-



rum which only had an eerie stare into the void. The radio, far from offering a healthier life beyond Paulie's psychopathic delusion, implies that society feeds the listener back to himself as cultural junk food.

Movie flashbacks can be a pain in the ass. Badly written scripts often use them as a cheat, a lazy back-up. Not so here. DiSomma uses them to show why Paulie has become such a danger to women, and he resists the temptation that we could just as easily call the other scenes flash forwards. The way they're incorporated ensures that the past is always there alongside the present, as befits Paulie's mind-set. There's an agonising *verité* feel to the scenes where desperate alcoholic Sheila seduces Paulie and similarly painful reality in the scenes where his mother—a prostitute at the mercy of her violent pimp—tries unsuccessfully to incorporate child-rearing into her disordered life. You could show *Victims* on a double bill with Asia Argento's superlative *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*. If you wanted to send the audience home in search of a razorblade.

Victims risks alienating the hang-around-and-flog-around crowd by extending sympathy to the killer, but it is DiSomma's insistence on showing Paulie as a victim too that gives the film moral weight. Even the use of the name Paulie instead of Paul stresses the ever-present child in this psychotic ruin of a man. The abuse of a child is something no civilized person argues to defend, and yet we're often unwilling to extend sympathy to those whose crimes are borne of childhood suffering. "Give us the child and we'll give you the truth," say the Catholics; it may as well be the child-molester's motto. Those who try to show such consideration are frequently accused of being more interested in defending the killer than the victim. DiSomma dismisses such heartlessness, showing his willingness as director by expressing compassion for all his characters. Even Sheila, the sexually abusive hooker who molests little Paulie, is depicted as a pitiful wreck caught in the coils of drugs and drink and loneliness. Echoing both *Psycho* and the sorely under-rated *Deranged*, DiSomma includes a shot of Paulie speaking with his mother's voice coming from his mouth. In this final conflation of victim and aggressor, we're reminded that the title of the film embraces Paulie too.



Early Days and Hayes Days

Daniel DiSomma (aka Tony Vorno, aka Sebastian Gregory) was born 12 April, 1927 in the city of White Plains, New York, of Italian immigrant parents. He entered the US Navy in 1945, and after his discharge studied acting with Joseph Anthony and Lee Strasberg, subsequently landing Broadway roles in Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real* and Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*. Off Broadway he appeared in Cocteau's *The Eagle Has Two Heads* with Colleen Dewhurst. These early acting experiences were to play a significant part in the genesis of *Victims*, as DiSomma explains: "The Actor's Studio in New York inspired me to work the way I did. In the 1950s, two plays that made it to Broadway - *End As a Man* and *A Hatful of Rain* - were both developed in a workshop atmosphere at the Studio. At the time I envied those at the Studio with the opportunity to work in such a concentrated form for months on end, much like I imagined The Moscow Arts Theatre did. The results could be very rewarding. This is the way I wanted to work and eventually I did, with *Victims*. Michael Gazzo, playwright of *Hatful*, lived on my block in Manhattan, in an area known as Hell's Kitchen. His apartment cost thirty-two dollars a month, nine fourteen-ninety-five! These were cold water flats which meant no heat, no hot water, most with toilets down the hallway. One was able to survive on very little in those days..."

This insalubrious setting, however, was to play a major part in DiSomma's career development: "Mike Gazzo made it big and moved out, and John Hayes moved in. John was a dear friend of mine for years and years." Both Hayes and DiSomma moved from New York to California in the late 1950s. Hayes was looking for financial backing to make his first feature, having produced a short film called *The Kiss*, now rated for an Academy Award in 1958. Once settled in Hollywood, Hayes parlayed the success of *The Kiss* into a tenture deal: the result was *Walk the Angry Beach* (1959), written, produced and directed by Hayes and starring DiSomma as 'Tony Vorno', alongside future TV star Rue McClanahan, here making her feature debut. The film, which is explored in more detail elsewhere in this book, played a few dates in the Southern States but went unreleased elsewhere until 1968. Other productions with John Hayes would follow, including starring roles in a handful of Hayes's early, less explicit sex dramas. "I was the 'lead stud' in his sex movies," jokes DiSomma, "but we were not hardcore. It was boobies and panties, that was as far as it went. *Help Wanted Female* was the first softcore John Hayes wrote and directed, with me playing the male lead. John was billed as 'Harold Perkins', I was 'Sebastian Gregory' John and a typewriter salesman, Dan Cady, formed their own company, Clover, to make and distribute softcore films."

DiSomma has used several pseudonyms over the years. "As a young student actor in New York, I was told by an agent that he saw stardom for me with the name Anthony Vorno - He - he could call me Archibald Leach if it was going to make me a star! So many actors changed their names in those days, notably Tony Curtis, originally Bernie Schwartz. I used Tony Vorno as actor in *Paulie* because I felt a separation between myself as actor and writer-director."

On the Road with Hopper and Ponda

In 1968, DiSomma took a job on one of the defining films of the decade: *Easy Rider*. A crew list for the film shows DiSomma as 2nd Assistant Director, although the screen credits have him listed as Location Manager. This dual credit is typical of the nature of this production, where participants wore many hats and unionized regulations were largely ignored. Although location manager responsibilities usually took DiSomma away from the day of shooting and on to the next location, he remembers: "When I returned to the set on occasion, I would take over as Assistant Director, although the job was no more than a traffic cop."

As Peter Biskind details in his book, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, months before principal photography on *Easy Rider* began, several scenes were shot on 16mm in a New Orleans graveyard, depicting the central characters on acid. This footage, shot February 1968, was then presented to the studio to secure financing. Only then was the film mounted.

15

Note: Tony Vorno's check

CREW LIST		SOUND BYDA LAB - CFI	
TITLE	NAME	PHONE NUMBER	
PRODUCER	PETER FONDA	274-6728	
PRODUCTION MANAGER	PAUL LEWIS	876-3335	
ASST. TO DIRECTOR	WILL HANCOCK		
BOOKKEEPER	LESLIE KAVACS		
CAMERA MAN	PETER HEISER		
EDITOR	PETER SORREL		
LEADY ROBINS			
TOM HANSEY		705-5363	
POSTER			
ART DIRECTOR	JERRY KAY		
2ND ASST. DIRECTOR	TONY VORNO		
STUNTS (BIKES)	THE HALL		
SCRIPT	JOYCE KING		
LABORATOR KAY			
ANSWER CALL			
PRODUCTION			



as sex comedy *Come One*

na Montano

1970, 1971

with a more typical pre-production schedule. As DiSomma recalls, "[Dennis [Hopper], Peter [Fonda], and Paul [Lewis, production manager] drove across country to New Orleans—most of the trip was along Route 66, an important highway in those days. They would enter a town or some other location and make notes on the places where they wanted to film. I was given these notes, clipped them to my legal size clipboard and, with a New York production car, went on the road. One of the sequences DiSomma worked on was the redneck café scene where Hopper, Nicholson and Fonda encounter small-town bigots whilst trying to buy breakfast. I found lots of young people, a Deputy (he was for real) character people—great faces. My job was to set the locations and arrange for people to appear in the scenes. When I entered the café the owner was behind the counter. I told her we would be shooting a movie in town and would like to film in the café. She knew everyone in town and in the fish camps nearby. Travelling around of the company much of the time, the telephone was my ally. While I'd be setting other locations miles away, I'd call her two, three times a day, making sure that everything was taken care of. When the company arrived in town, everything was ready. The townspeople were waiting to participate. I remember when I returned to the set that morning, Dennis excitedly asked, 'Where did you get all these people?' Heh!, I said, 'I just turned out the whole town.' Of course, with my lady behind the counter it was easy.

Another challenge DiSomma managed was the arrangement to shoot the Pueblo of the Taos tribe of New Mexico, as DiSomma evocatively relates: "This scene was but a moment on screen, yet meeting with the Council one night to discuss filming there was only one concession they made to the White Man's civilisation: Coleman lanterns in the cool adobe walls and the manicured dirt floor. I felt privileged being there. Their spokesman was the only one who spoke to me in English. The others spoke through him in their own language. A dispute arose from the fact that the

tribe was under the impression a photographic unit was going to take some stills. They were not aware it would be a movie company. I was able to solve the financial arrangement differences with a plea to the Council that a compromise had to be reached or we couldn't afford the location. I felt I was in a John Ford movie negotiating a treaty on the frontier."

Then came the parade sequence—Santa Fe Springs, New Mexico. Brief shots of Peter and Dennis riding their bikes in Parade, getting arrested, landing in jail. With police and Chamber of Commerce cooperation I was able to have those involved standing by early in the morning waiting for the company to arrive. By that time I was in Texas. Amazing what little people had in a man with a clipboard! And if something was needed, DiSomma rose to the occasion: "Junk they thought *Henry Fonda* was coming to town. I did star over the first name at times.

Like all low-budget features, corners simply had to be cut on *Pan. Rider* sometimes at risk to the (nonetheless winning) crew. "The script called for the final scenes to be shot in Florida, but we ended outside of New Orleans, Louisiana. The heat and humidity were terrible. The last shots of the movie, taken from a helicopter, would have been banned that day if the authorities had known a helicopter was going to try to lift off in such heavy burning air. That is what the pilot told me. With a great deal of effort he lifted off. Cameraman Laszlo 'Lesue' Kovacs was taking his life in his hands that day. The cooperation I received on every location we needed was magical. People were so willing to be a part of the project and at so little pay. During the time we spent in Texas, Dennis, Peter and Jack wouldn't spend the night there, they would drive to Taos, New Mexico—at least a thousand miles round trip—and return the next day spaced out. Texas, then and now, has such ridiculous laws about drugs. A little pot would land you in jail.

Come One Come All—this far and no further...

Having seen his friend John Haves cut a parallel career making softcore sex films, DiSomma decided to try his hand at the directing game. The result was *Come One Come All* (1970). This frivolous erotic comedy, about a put-upon Lethario (DiSomma) so exhausted by the demands of his female admirers that he fakes his own suicide to escape them, is considerably lighter on tone than the Haves films and *Venus*. A vanity project built around DiSomma's central performance, it could perhaps have used a little more air plot-wise, as the central conceit is overstretched. The most enjoyable parts of the film come when DiSomma/Vorno playing an aspiring writer, touts his idea for a screenplay around the Hollywood B-picture studios, giving the viewer a rare glimpse into the subterranean film industry of the late sixties. However, DiSomma's light-hearted spoof lost out to the rising trend for more explicit, raunchier sex films, and although it received a few good notices it failed at the time to ignite his directing career. The times they were a-changin' and fast: perched as it was on the lip of the new porno-decade, *Come One Come All* suffered from bad timing on two counts. When it was shot, in 1970 the sexual frankness of *Deep Throat* was still two years away. "In *Come One Come All* I showed pubic hair and the distributor was up the wall!" DiSomma remembers. Then gallingly, two years later when the film eventually received some distribution, he found he had missed the boat: "It hit right at the time that hardcore came in, and softcore just didn't matter any more.



A Cunning
Cockta
In COLOR
A FILM FOR THE ERECTOR SET! - So Adult It Smarts!

COME ONE, COME ALL!

1970, 1971



The Dancer (Dorothy Camma) tries to seduce Sebastian Gregory to the brink of death after a torrid go-go dancing session in *Come One Come All* (aka *6 Angels for Satan*)

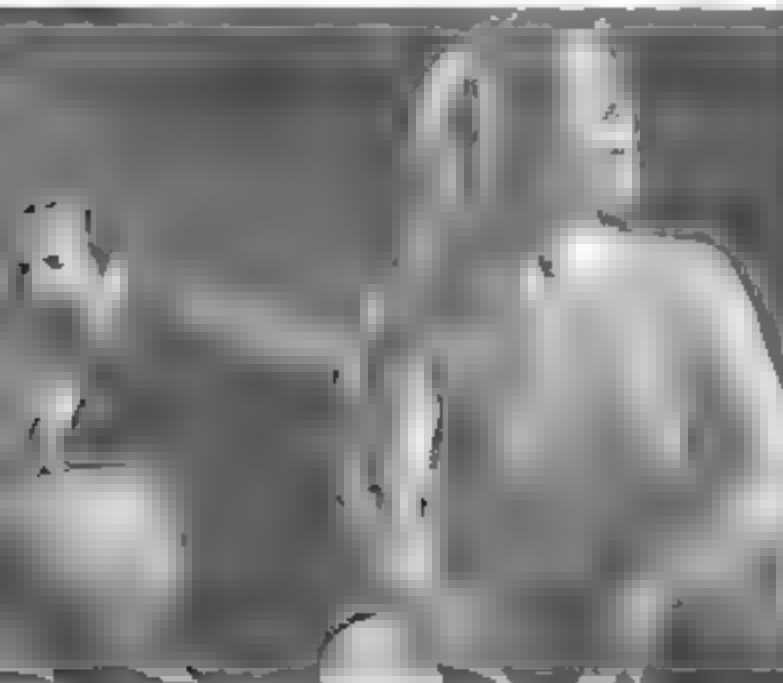
6 Angels for Satan

A SEBASTIAN GREGORY PRODUCTION

RELEASED BY CLOVER FILMS

...iving public hair was normal, compared to what took place." DiSomma was unlucky, making just a modest payday at a time when porn movies were about to explode the roof. "*Come One Come All* cost me on the side about \$15,000 and I made maybe 50% profit, paid the rest off and made a little myself," he shrugs. Prior to shooting his own picture, DiSomma had appeared in one of John Hayes's sex-themed "Harold Lloyd" movies, *Baby Vickie* (1969), in which he played a pest with whom Vickie is obsessed. "I also helped with production in San Francisco," he remembers. "In those days, Hayes was out of bounds for hardcore. Now the San Francisco police in Los Angeles is dotted with smug

winkers making hardcore. But seven years later DiSomma was to reach his tolerance limit, when it came to working on one of Hayes's bleakest, hardest, most pornographic films. "I didn't last long on *Baby Rosemary*. Two days into shooting as sound man, I couldn't handle it. It all seemed so meaningless and degrading. I left, returned home to Los Angeles. John's distributing company needed product and hardcore was in, but I was out."



Gregory with the woman who seduced him to the brink of death

Gregory's funeral (see page 10)

Paulie

Paulie, John DiSomma, and the other members of the group, directing and starring in *Victims*. The project began life as a script called *Paulie* prepared by DiSomma at Theater East in Los Angeles. Theater East was a workshop for the presentation of new material written by members, critiqued by a moderator and others in the group. DiSomma remembers that, "At times plays would be presented for paying audiences. Actors Equity, our situation, has a policy allowing actors to perform with very little pay if the theatre has a seating capacity of ninety-nine or fewer seats. If not acting, members would help with costumes, props and sets. I joined Theater East with a specific project in mind - *Paulie*."

After honing the script through repeated exposure at Theater East, principal photography took place over four weekends during the Spring of 1977 at locations in the Los Angeles area - Mulholland Drive, San Fernando Valley and Santa Monica - with a budget raised by DiSomma's wife at the time, Jeanine, who acted as executive producer. The budget was limited to in-the-can costs only - enough to pay for a work print and for all the 16mm photography to be shot, developed and synched. "My low budget dictated the shooting schedule," DiSomma explains, "I rented camera and equipment on weekends. We would pick up late Friday afternoon, having to pay for Saturday only. We would start shooting Friday night, continuing on Saturdays and Sundays. Equipment was returned Monday morning. Each sequence in the film was designed to be shot as a contained unit. One weekend for the mother, another for the psychiatrist and another for the hooker's apartment, etc. Film takes were at a minimum ratio - two or three to one. At

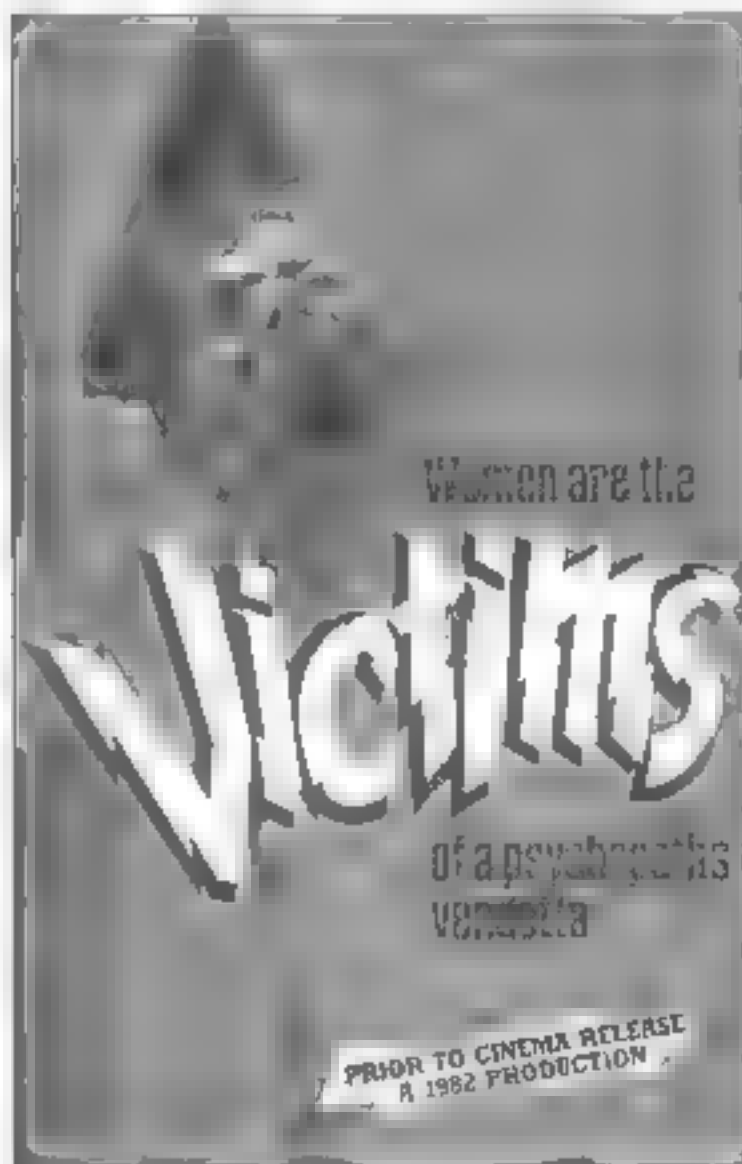
major scenes were presented on stage at Theater East prior to the start of film production, and all cast members, with the exception of the psychiatrist, belonged to the group. I had the opportunity to work in close collaboration with the actors to develop my characters. This meant that most of the time our shooting schedule was devoted to camera angles, lighting, sets, etc. The actors knew what their tasks were, so that even when some nudity was expected, they were effortless in expression." As for his own performance as director and an actor, I could do no worse - the laughs, the best and the worst comes out.

Initially the film was to have been shot by Henning Schellerup, the DP on some of John Hayes's films and DiSomma's *Come One Come All*. At the last minute Ray Leely, an assistant cameraman on several Dan Cady productions, stepped in. "Ray Leely didn't have the pace I wanted but I got a quality with Ray which I couldn't duplicate with my other DP, Henning Schellerup. I was shooting in negative stock 16mm, very difficult to light, and Ray was not quick at lighting. So we went for reversal stock, where less lighting was involved. But it turned out that all the scenes I shot in reversal stock were the scenes in flashback with the hooker and the mother. If I'd known I'd be going to TV and video only, I would have shot it and printed it in 16mm and never gone to 35mm, because 35mm blow-ups cost me half the budget."

He continues: "Small as the budget was, everyone involved in the production was paid. I hired a small projection room and showed the film to small groups of friends and business people to raise enough money to finish the project." Scrapping by in this way, the film was ready to be shown to potential distributors.

Distribution Hell

The last chapter of the *Paulie* story is a familiar one to those who've studied independent filmmaking. DiSomma explains: "Distribution became a nightmare in part because of our naivety. We had several private screenings for average movie-goers and professionals, soliciting their comments with a questionnaire. The distributor, Shel Harris of Films International, said he had an angle. Every low budget, independent film has to have an 'angle', I guess. At the time the Hillside Strangler dominated the news. Hyping the similarities, adding narration and some additional cuts would add to the shock value. At first I thought the program publicity began to go out - an article in the *The Hollywood Reporter* - publicity to theatre owners for bookings. As I was working on the changes, he presented us with a contract. It called for all monies received from foreign distribution to be his without a share returned to our company and investors. I pulled the plug. I had the sense to realise he would pocket any monies received, foreign or domestic. Professionally, I might have received some media recognition. A cup of the film was shown on ABC Network News tying it to the Hillside Strangler case. According to the distributor, I was unavailable and he himself appeared on TV in hand, for his moment of fame. Knowing I would no longer cooperate with him, he attempted to seize my negative at the lab, under the ruse that he was now the owner. He took us to court and tried to get a judgement that I turn over all material pertaining to the film. He failed. A dream turned into a nightmare and the film has never been released in the United States, Canada, Mexico and South America. In 1982 Transcontinental Pictures Industries





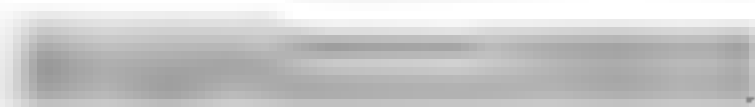
became our distributors. They never made it clear that the only market open to them was foreign home video. Their sales pitch was they would guarantee a sale to the U.K. for \$15,000. Other sales were Australia and New Zealand \$4000, S Africa \$4000, Taiwan \$3000, Hong and \$3000 and Israel \$900. Total received by Sonoma Films after distributor's percentage and additional lab costs was \$1,699.

Disappointing to say the least.

For DiSomma, this insulting payday for so much work and creative effort was the last straw. "I just dropped right out. I got the film released in Europe, it was on home video and okay that's it, I can't handle it any more. I went back and sold some family property, made a few bucks, took up in a rental home and travelled off, cross-country, west to Mexico and Canada. Even at this point, I'm wanting to do things, at seventy-six years old. I'm living now up in the mountains, about sixty-five miles from L.A. - an hour away which means I'd have to drive the freeways to get into Hollywood. I've been there. I've done that. I've done just about everything you can do - whether people recognise or not. I do! Sometime as an actor you might have an

experience on stage that is so unbelievable that it encompasses everything that's religious, or whatever's beautiful in life, and you're completely free as an actor, and I've had that happen to me, so nobody can say to me, "Gee don't you want to st... act?" I'd say, "Jeez. I've been sold me!" [laughs]. And fortunately there were critics at that very moment, an article in the papers about *Hatim of Ram*, that says, "*Hatim* powerful, Vorno great." Crazy things like that have happened in my life, but you know, I'm just not a recognized person, that's all.

Note: At present all contracts in the home video market have run their course and DiSomma possesses sole rights to any and all distributions of Victims and Come On, Come All.



The poster using the title *The Stranger* credits DiSomma as the director of the film.

DiSomma

opposite page: stills
images from the film

DANIEL DISOMMA: BIOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Victims and Come On, Come All (1988)

Victims

The Hang-Up - dir. John Hayes (as Sebastian Gregory)

The Erotic Adventures of Zorro (as Sebastian Gregory)

Garden of the Gods - dir. John Hayes (as Tony Vorno)

Victims (as Tony Vorno)

Victims (as Tony Vorno)

OTHER CREDITS:

Victims - dir. Daniel DiSomma (as Tony Vorno)
Victims - dir. Daniel DiSomma (as Tony Vorno)
Victims - dir. Daniel DiSomma (as Tony Vorno)
Victims - dir. Daniel DiSomma (as Tony Vorno)
Victims - dir. Daniel DiSomma (as Tony Vorno)
Victims - dir. Daniel DiSomma (as Tony Vorno)



If At First You Don't Succeed...

The Films of Tony Malanowski

Night of Horror (1981)

"The movie runs, I believe, about seventy-five minutes; the ~~most~~ seventy-five minutes of my life. I think it takes longer to watch than it did to actually make! I confess that I haven't been able to endure it in its entirety for as long as I've owned it." *Steve Sandkühler, star of Night of Horror*

Night of Horror is just about as dumb as it can be as a choice, as you may feel like beating your brains out on the very end of the movie. The extended opening scene is just what's to come in uncompromising fashion. Two guys, Steve (Steve Sandkühler) and Chris (Tony Stark, aka writer-director Tony Malanowski) perch on stools facing a wall. We see them in long shot, backs to the camera. Their forlorn dialogue concerns musical aspirations (they're in a band, which is obviously going nowhere—as represented by the wall). There's a bare minimum of cutting, and we're granted no close-ups, just a couple of opaque mid-shot profiles, and they're especially unrevealing since Sandkühler's luxurious rock-star mane obscures much of his face). Their dialogue—mumbled, morose and directionless, not to mention peripheral to the actual story—accounts for the first ten minutes of the film! Now that's hardcore—it's like Andy Warhol in a major suit.

But sorry, lovers of emptiness, the story has to begin sometime. Rest assured though that it will all be conveyed with the same flat, ungarnished glare throughout. Things break into first gear when Steve tells Chris what's really on his mind: he's back from a trip to the country, and what occurred there has been troubling him ever since. In prolonged flashback, we see why.

Steve and his three friends—Colleen (Gae Schmidt), Jeff (Jeff Canfield) and Susan (Rebecca Bach)—take a weekend's drive to look at a property Jeff's father has left

him in a will, but their camper van (which receives so much screen time it should have its own agent) breaks down before they arrive, stranding them in the wilds. Sounds like a typical lead-in for a rural-set horror tale? Not quite. The set-up gobbles nearly a third of the running time. Before we can progress to the nub of the story, we're treated to a long, long take of the camper van

driving from city to countryside. It's actually quite mesmerizing. If you've ever recorded a holiday jaunt with a film or video camera, you can appreciate where this sequence is coming from. The camera gazes capably through the window and one can almost feel the excited enthusiastic energy behind the lens, the camaraderie of the cast and any crew (very tiny as it turns out). Little more than a group of friends out for the weekend, hoping to make a movie in the process. This "outboard" shot is held so long I found myself somehow transported, watching the motorways and bridges and country roads slip by as if I were there on the day, a ghost haunting the filmmakers. The downhearted music also helps, as long as you're amenable to slightly overwrought vamping on a cheap synthesized piano. I know, I am.)

Eventually, the four friends jump out to stretch their legs. Then—to gasps of astonishment from the unwary viewer—they re-embark and hit the road again. Steve takes

Shooting *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*. Director Tony Malanowski in the background, soundman Big John Simmons in the foreground.

A Confederate zombie lurks in the mist in *Night of Horror*.





Night of Horror's scarce



a shrike to Colleen, who's been getting "the worst vibrations" since the funeral. She reads Poe aloud, and predicts problems ahead. When the van malfunctions, the previously unflappable Steve, who must never have encountered a Cioth before, is freaked: "That was the first real problem of the trip. Colleen knew something was even happened. They all went out to see what was on. I sat frozen in the back. No way was I going out where the rest of them were going."

By the way, do you like the music yet? Please try, there's lots more to come. If you're to accept Malanowski's slow, uneven, but takes and static, stubbornly non-schietic compositions, you'll need the score as your ally. It has a bright but somehow morbid quality, like sunlight through a hearse window. Somewhere heartstrings are being tugged, although on whose behalf the script doesn't elaborate. I find myself sinking deeper into the music, and I wonder for a moment if I'm being hypnotized when, forty minutes in, it occurs to me that I would like to buy the soundtrack album.

As the camera directs its moribund gaze at the broken-down van, Steve's plaintive voice-over seems to emanate from inside the vehicle: "It sounded like the muffler maybe the whole exhaust is shot. It's like a sinking van expiring its own failure, a perception which makes me realize that *Night of Horror*, for all its apparent simplicity, is playing with my head. Perhaps I shouldn't have eaten those funny little mushrooms."

Spooky time. A patrol of undead soldiers gather in the windows. There's been much debate among fans about the relative merits of slow-moving versus running zombies, but no one's ever lit a torch for Malanowski's version: the standing, slow-moving, zombie-like creatures.

hat, calling them zombies, they're really more like ghosts. Only later in the remake *The Curse of the Screaming Dead* do they chew flesh. But even as ghosts they're a reticent bunch: a half-dozen soldiers standing in a blur somewhere, never straying into the same shot as the main cast. Steve, Colleen, Jeff and Susan sit blank-faced

around the campfire, listening to the undead's leader as he describes—in a hoarse, virtually incomprehensible voice

the misfortunes of his Confederate army unit. Each syllable is drawn out like a death-rattle, so much so that you can easily forget the one before. The monologue becomes detached from humanity; it's barely a voice any more. It's like listening to a faulty central heating system when you're running a fever, or playing a gigantic unfinished audio version of "Hangman." Totally abstract-maximal. Ten minutes of footage shot at a War Games Society (Yankies vs. Confederates) sends the bemused viewer on vacation from the plot, while a vocal guitar rendition of the main theme plays on and on. At last, Steve summarizes the essence of the zombie soldiers' story: "I couldn't believe what I was hearing! They at first thought that Colleen was the reincarnation of a woman from over one hundred years ago."

The four friends decide they've heard enough of this jnacy and, to sobs of gratitude from the audience, get to their feet and head back to the road. Steve nudges along behind, fantasizing heroics over Colleen: "It was my last chance, a chance to possibly save her from all this madness. But all I could think of was getting the camper fixed. I was obsessed. If I could do that, maybe everything would be some... then I followed Colleen into the darkness, the darkness broken only by a starkly bright, now harsh moonlight." The three friends bury a skull in

the exact spot requested by the ghosts (for reasons lost somewhere in the folds of that fourteen-minute sonnet).

"It was here that the hauntings were laid to rest," assures Steve. "Then... then Colleen... now thoroughly... in a deep trance... she prayed over the grave." The piano theme swells yet again, the ghosts gasp their appreciation, and the brownish video transfer sucks the actors away into a rectangle of soil bulging from my television like rising bread.

1.2.3, you're back in the room, and like a true cyclical nightmare, we return to hear Steve telling Chris his problems, both men still perched on stools against a plain wood-finish wall. No camera movement. His brainaching, Chris goes outside and stares into the swimming pool. "Try not to expect too much," mutables Steve off camera, in the last, epigrammatic words of the film.

It's almost impossible to explain why this film should give me pleasure, even as it drives me nuts. Tony Mulanowski has concocted an experience beyond the pale for all but the most dedicated students of anti-cinema. It feels like a dream you might have had under the influence of a bad drug, or a nightmarishy depleted and inertia scenario circling round and round in your brain during detox. Maybe I'm enthralled because I feel like it's at the end of the line for horror, for bad films in general. Is that it? Is *Night of Horror* the worst film I've ever seen? I have to say no: despite its extraordinarily slow pace and its total lack of action and thrills, *Night of Horror* pleases me more than a whole cartload of bigger, more prestigious productions. By most 'objective' standards, *Night of Horror* is bottom-of-the-barrel, but we watched it three times and will probably watch it three more. 'Bad movies', as we all know, are not the worst movies. Mediocrity is the only real crime in cinema, and *Night of Horror* is, in some mad way, extraordinary.

We always been sensitive to mood in the movies, and I'm frequently drawn to films where the mood is dominant over plot and coherence. *Night of Horror* is a case in point. I respond to its moroseness, its ambience of dereliction, its sludgy melancholy, and on a humorous level to its perversity, its lack of all the things you expect from even the cheapest exploitation films. And if you disregard notions of entertainment in the usual genre sense, there's still some tiny flame alive here, captured in the fragile trust of the director that we might keep watching, wrapped up in the lugubrious music, in the inescapable nostalgia of film itself. Cinema is a time machine: in some strange way I feel as if I've lived a day in the life of Tony Mulanowski, tagged along with Steve Sandkühler and friends - an experience that feels almost as real as the ones preserved in my own ancient photographs from the early eighties, places I went, days spent idling and wandering, friends I used to know. *Night of Horror* is a terrible horror film, but against the odds it has an unexpected warmth, a peacefulness, and a glow in its thickening nothings.

Postscript from Steve Sandkühler "Understand, though, that the finished product was not the real final product at all. *Night of Horror* evolved into the bad - but better - *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*. Not many people get the opportunity to be in something that even remotely resembles a feature length film. And *Curse* - without even trying - was soooo camp! All five of my kids love making their friends watch it."

The Curse of the Screaming Dead (1982)

The Curse of the Screaming Dead follows the adventures of three couples as they head into the woods on a drinking shooting and arguing holiday. Before long they've added to their woes by stumbling upon an unmarked graveyard occupied by belligerent, if initially dead, Confederate soldiers. When se fish, hot-headed Mel (Christopher Gammeter) steals a stray artefact precious to the soldiers (linked to their painful torture during a Union massacre), the scene is set for a mass zombie uprising, Baltimore style.

This is Tony Mulanowski's second stab at the same story, and at first glance *The Curse of the Screaming Dead* and its precursor *Night of Horror* are cut from the same cloth. They're each of them rife with padded dialogue and actionless *langueurs*, both are built around the same very specialised theme in an already specialised sub-genre - not just Zombie Movies, but Zombie Confederate-Soldier Movies! - and they feature many of the same cast members. There's good reason for this, as Tony explains in the interview later in this chapter, but initially you tend to recoil from the repetition: the ultra-low energy levels, long takes, and drawn out elaborations of the simplest set-ups. The meandering dialogue is perhaps the biggest stumbling block for most viewers. Talk is, after all, frequently the genre's enemy - unless it's very well written it stymies both mood and action. *Night* goes further, interspersing very long dialogue scenes with actionless mooching around. *Curse* too opens with a good forty minutes of verbal filler, but eventually digresses from its predecessor by handing the viewer a lifeline, in the form of some genuinely actionful horror.

Watching both films gives us the chance to adjust to the director's style. *Night of Horror*, easily the most 'difficult' of the pair, takes on a battered poignancy next to the more polished *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*: whilst *Curse*, seen after *Night of Horror*, assumes heroic dimension, triumphant second stab at the same story, showing growth and advancement in just about all areas. The two are twinned so closely it'd be fun to see them projected alongside each other like some avant-garde underground movie - the *Chelsea Girls* of zombie films. Well, I'm tinnier' you a little, but don't get me wrong. I cherish these movies. No one is going to claim them as neglected masterpieces, but there's a windswept, *Night on the Bare Mountain* frugality, a determination to make something out of almost nothing, that shames many a more complacently budgeted horror.

For all this talk of limitations, *Curse* really springs to life when the living dead attack. The zombie make-ups and mask designs are almost Fatai-esque at times, and the scene where the ghouls rip yards of intestine from the abdomen of a policeman is wonderfully gruesome and convincing (summoning fond recollections of Jorge Grau's *The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue* and Jess Franco's *Devil Hunter*). There are numerous incidental pleasures along the way: the music, for instance, has an unexpectedly jazzy feel, redolent of The Mike Westbrook Orchestra, whilst some cues, built around a chugging bassline and choppy strings, resemble Michael Nyman's work for Peter Greenaway (I kid you not). Try imagining the movie burdened with a regulation synthesizer score, like the one that screws up Charles McClann's *Forest of Fear*, and you'll appreciate how much the composer has enlivened the film by junking outside the genre box.



David Dunho, *Night of Horror*'s special effects wizard, uses his 'Scream Juice'



Mel (Christopher Gammeter) runs to shoot at the living dead



The Curse of the

2. read

4. *See* also *The Screaming Dead*.

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1. $\mathcal{H} = \mathcal{H}^{\text{in}} \oplus \mathcal{H}^{\text{out}}$ and $\mathcal{H}^{\text{in}} \cap \mathcal{H}^{\text{out}} = \{0\}$.

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The cast attack their roles gamely. Steve Sandherr's Wyatt is a livelier creation than his ineffably morose character in *Night of Horror*, and Rebecca Bach is also more likeable here as the innumerate Sarah (even if the dialogue does give her extra fun only to mock it with snipes at Women's Lib). An emphatic performance by Christopher Gammier makes mean-spirited Met the most perversely likeable character as the actor has persuasively taken charge of ensuring the film doesn't slide back into the *Night of Horror* acid-dramas. There are a few mis-fires though. Mimi Shikawa, the pretty young actress who plays paranormal-y sensitive Kryom, struggles through an ineffectual but useless subplot that makes her un-PC credit as a death-kick-off easier to ignore. Even so, for what she's up to nevertheless, her air of doe-like nervousness is a creditable alternative to the standard screamer role. Though the film trips into Ed Wood territory are two am-dram cops whose magnificent implausibility is clinched when the Sergeant theorises that psychopaths are faking the zombie attacks by arranging stolen cadavers on a pulley-system mounted in the trees! We are wearily accustomed to the police in horror films being unimaginative plodders, so this bonkers flight of fancy is a rare treat and worth quipping in its

These kids think the only way to get out of the house is to go out of the tree. It's a ropes-like puppets. Spooky business. I'm sure glad I never up-took undertaken. Anyway, this guy and his pals steal a few bodies every now and then and in the middle of the night it's easy to get foisted. They know that they get some rope, drop the bodies down from some trees and sort of dance them around a little. Wow Matanowski

manages in this scene, I think to redeem one of the lost causes of the horror genre—cop dialogue. They are usually the least interesting characters in a horror film, here. For myself hankering to see them again, maybe to king crazy old Donat Pleasance down off his Boogeyman trip in Carpenter's *Halloween* with some theory about Bill Shat on the rampage.

There's something about the zombie as a figure in horror's pantheon that invites a tolerance and even a love of the cheaper manifestations. Vampires require some mystery and preferably a splash of money to be spent on decor at least, but there's something plebeian and unpretentious about the Living Dead, as if the abjectness of bodily decay sets a base standard which can then be inverted into a sort of glamour. Provided the director avoids the simple-minded can-posturing of films like *Zombie 99*, *Extreme Pestures*, or *House of 1000 Corpses*, buttressed with performances that scream 'Growl! look at me! I'm a god-damned zombie ghoul monster!' he or she can draw on something akin to the energy of the dispossessed, the roiling belly of the underdog. Tony Malenowski's zombie soldiers defeated in the American Civil War and clinging to the symbolic worth of their flag emerge from the soil with a similar muted poignancy to the wasted Etruscan gladiators. Andrea Bianchi's Italian effort *The Breasts of Terror* or the unexpected y soulful German re-tops of Jean Rollé's *Zombie Lake*. *The Curse of the Screaming Dead* stands alongside these European titles, shoulder to shoulder aiding a US battalion to the French, Spanish and Italian hordes. They're at the arse-end of the genre spearheaded by George Romero, to be sure; but what price an army without





Baltimore Maryland. The 1970s. Home of John Waters Divine and the Dream and repertory company. Home as well to Don Dohler and his merry band of monster-makers. Two very different groups, similar only in their devotion to the region, and their commitment to creating an alternative movie reality with the absolute minimum of cost. Waters and Dohler have always shot their movies in and around Baltimore, indeed, here are times when their woodland locutions look uncannily similar, as if a shaky pan to the left in *Desperate Living* might reveal Don Dohler's interhyec creature staggering around in the trees, or a hand-held arch to the right in *The Alien Factor* would spot Dawn Davenport making out with Earl Peterson on an abandoned mattress. Well, there are no skidmarked skivvies in Dohler's films, and no mutant rats in Waters's (the only shared feature being George S. Scott, a local actor who worked for both directors). But there was another player in the Baltimore woods, whose work has received almost no exposure even in the cult environs of horror publishing.

It's 1980. Waters is preparing *Polyester*, his first semi-"respectable" movie. Dohler is prepping *NightBeast*, a gory monster flick. And out there in the trees a third camera grinds away, a third minuscule-budget epic is being harvested: except this one will make *Female Trouble* look like *Gone with the Wind*, and *NightBeast* look like *Alien*; the film is *Night of Horror*, and the director/writer/cameraman/producer is Tony Malanowski, a one-time assistant to Dohler, now directing a film of his own.

Waters once commented that his favourite art-house director, Marguerite Duras, "makes the kind of films that get you punched in the face for recommending them to even your closest friends [...] Her films are maddeningly boring but really quite beautiful." *Night of Horror* chalks up a noble two out of three on this scorecard, as it's like you're watching a similar deleterious effect on your friendships, as it is maddeningly boring as art-house film, and only loses out in the final furlong by falling short of beauty. But you can't have everything. *Night of Horror* was made for the kind of money that Marguerite Duras sprinkles on her *rommes freres*, so if the cast look a little *deshabille* and the photography is a little on the brown side, we can surely make allowances. And besides, as I explain in my review of this movie, there is something *near* to beauty in the film, an elusive charm that perhaps you need to be half-crazy to appreciate, but which nevertheless counts.

Malanowski is a genial, good-humoured man who works today in the comfortable offices of Ascent Media in Hollywood, prepping smash-hit TV shows like *Satinfata* or their DVD and HD upgrades. On the way, he became a skilled film and sound editor with a long list of credits for prolific dynamo directors like David Prior, David DeCoreau and Fred Olen Ray. He is just slightly pleased at how far he's come since the early days of his career, but he's happy to stress just how important those days were in making the later achievements possible. He doesn't simply dismiss *Night of Horror* as an embarrassment even though he readily concedes its failings. Tony Malanowski's recollections provide one of the most vivid



illustrations in this book of the painstaking process of low-budget filmmaking, the thrills and the trials and the grinding frustrations of working with virtually no money, struggling to get a feature-length movie on the screen by hook or by crook. Even if you never see *Night of Horror* (I would recommend it to masochists, students of poverty-stricken filmmaking, fanatics, and insomniacs in need of a celluloid cosh), his follow-up *The Curse of the Screaming Dead* is well worth seeking out for all zombie-movie devotees: if you've opened your heart to Jess Franco's *Quists of the Living Dead*, or spent money on a DVD of Giuliano's *Zombie Holocaust*, I'm sure you'll find pleasure in Malanowski's entertaining contribution to the form!

Early Days

Antony Malanowski was born on 26 January, 1937, in Baltimore City, Maryland, the region where he would go on to work, first as assistant to Don Dohler and then as director of his own brace of curious, extremely low-budget horror movies. "When I was about nine months old, my parents moved to the suburbs," he recalls. "My father got a job at the Bethlehem Steel Mill in Sparrow's Point, Maryland, so the family moved to the Bear Creek area, which was about five miles away from the Steel Mill. My dad had a pretty good job at the Steel Mill as a machinist, so we were doing alright. My dad's parents were both immigrants from Poland, while my mom's mom was from Poland, and her dad was from Russia."

It was cinema as giant spectacle that first attracted his attention: "There were two films that really got me. The

Tony Malanowski's
 John Dohler's
 the Screaming Dead
 OCR by A =



Adventure
= Thrilling

First was John Wayne's *The Atomic* at the Carlton Theater in Dundalk. I was such a huge film. I remember just sitting there mesmerized! I guess I was about four years old. At one point, I told my mom that I needed to go to the bathroom, and she let me go by myself (which was not dangerous back then, even in Dundalk!). Instead of going to the back of the theatre where the restrooms were, I sneaked up to the front row and just stared up at that big Todd-AO CinemaScope image. It was breathtaking. Even then (around 1964), I loved watching films like *Kong Kong*, *Gunga Din*, and *The Thing* on TV so I was already leaning towards fantasy and adventure films. My mom took us to see Jerry Lewis's *The Atom Professor*, and they showed the trailer for *Kong Kong in Godzilla*. I was totally hooked. I begged my mom to take me the next week, which she did. My life hasn't been the same since. (Incidentally, I got to relate this story to Taru Nakamura, the actor who played Godzilla (and, in most scenes, King Kong). You should have seen his face when the film's director asked him to take a few responses for my working in films!

With his appetite whetted by screen superstar Godzilla, it would only be a matter of time before the hunger for cinematic hugely influential film magazine on the racks. "I was really falling in love with movies and the entertainment industry when, like so many others of my generation, I spied my first issue of Furry Ackerman's *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine. For me it was issue #26, with *The Outer Limits* on the cover. I learned a lot from *Famous Monsters*. Furry's style of writing (had puns and a bit) brought to life the people who made the films. It stopped being a 'magazine only' kind of job, and became more accessible. Reading the life stories of Ray Harryhausen, Boris Karloff, Roger Corman et al. I realized that working in the film business was an attainable goal. Since my dad had an 8mm (and later Super-8) 16mm

camera, I started using it to make my own films.

I corralled my friends in the neighbourhood, and did pictures with the kinds of special effects I read about in *Famous Monsters*. I scratched the film to make ray-gun blasts, I super-imposed weird colours over images. I even converted two GI Joe dolls into a white-fur covered gorilla, and a giant, mutated astronaut. They fought on a card table with a Christmas cracker town built on it. The effects were actually rather smooth at points, which was not unusual for a 16mm.

Malanowski left high school in 1975, by which time he was working on 16mm films with Bill George, a film poster collector studying at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. "Bill and I (along with a friend named Charlie Hicks), formed a company selling movie posters at shows in Baltimore and New York City," he recalls.

"We'd go up to NYC every six to eight weeks for conventions, make a few bucks, and meet a lot of film people (I met Peter Cushing at the 1974 *Famous Monsters Convention*). It was at one of these shows that I met Scott MacQueen, who would later get me involved in the film business at the Walt Disney Studios. I eventually went to UMBC myself to study film, at the time the noted media-magist Stan Van Der Beek came to teach."

It was at this time that Malanowski first met Don Dobler, soon-to-be director of rough and ready regional monster flicks like *The Alien Factor*, *Friend and Night Beast*. "I met Don through Bill George and Charlie Hicks (another film fan friend)," Malanowski recalls. "Larry Svehla was probably also involved in there somewhere. The filmmaking film fan community was pretty tight back then – if you went to one movie screening or the annual Balt Con science-fiction convention, you could meet pretty much everybody who shared your interests. And remember this was way before VHS and DVDs. If you wanted to see a picture, you either waited for it to run on TV or you went to a screening at the local school or library. Very restrictive but it made even the most pedestrian picture a special event. Around this time, Don Dobler was thinking about making a low-budget feature. He got a group of us together, and we kicked around a few ideas. I think what really got us to take the plunge was when George Romero was a guest at Balt Con one year. I was one of four people who acted as 'Guest Liaisons' for the convention, volunteering to be general goodwill ambassadors and guest 'gofers'. We were made up in pseudo-*Planet of the Apes* make-ups and leisure suits. We picked up Isaac Asimov at the train station, and tended to George Romero as well. By this time, I had acquired a 'portable' 35mm projector, so I brought that along to screen George's then new feature *The Crazies* (1973). So I got to know him pretty well over those three days. One night over drinks he really pushed us to make a film, the same way he made *Night of the Living Dead*. Make it in 16mm, get your friends to work for free – you know, the same thing we'd all had been doing in Super-8mm for the last few years. So the next few months, what would become *The Alien Factor* began to get going. I went, to my teachers at UMBC and told them that I was dropping out of film school and throwing away my scholarship. Stan told me what a mess I was making. Funny thing is, a year or so later he read about me in the local paper and called me in to lecture."

Making *Night of Horror*

Malanowski set to work in the summer of 1980: "I went to Pete Carey at Quality Film Labs (the only film lab in Baltimore), and made a deal to cover the processing and printing costs. Don Dohler had made a similar deal with Pete for his film *Fiend*. I then ordered the raw stock from Kodak through Pete. I paid cash—a couple of thousand dollars. I jumped in feet first, guessing that no matter how scared I was (and, though I was very confident, I was still plenty scared), this put me in a position where I either made the picture, or lost a lot of money! I then wrote the script during lunch breaks at my State job, and during the evenings. It wasn't much of a script—just some disjointed scenes—other. Again, my main thing was the technical side, so I'm afraid I let the story slide! I looked at the picture as a glorified student film that I could make a few bucks from. Better dropping out of college than making a feature than spending four years and having a handful of shorts, right? I was also naive enough to believe some of the things written about Roger Corman, how his actors would improvise. I guessed my actors could do that too! So the script was pretty threadbare. I took the title from a goofy Bela Lugosi melodrama called *Night of Terror*. During shooting, we called the picture *Night of Unmarked*—and when the first dailies came out with a lot of some improvisations that just didn't work—my fault, not his—I started calling the picture *Night of Bankruptcy*! But *Night of Horror* was always the title.

From the start, it was to be a lower-than-low-budget endeavor. "I had less money than we had on *The Alien Factor*—and no crew. Remember, I was used to doing everything myself, so the picture had to be pared down so that I could work the camera, do the lighting, and all grip and prep work. This would also carry over into editorial and post-production duties. Naturally, everything was shot on 16mm on mostly ECO and EF stocks. These stocks were very slow, which means they needed to be well-lit. Since I didn't have many lights, that became a problem during night shoots. But, by using the ECO during the days, and switching to faster EF during the nights, I think we came out pretty good. Contrasty, but good. And, of course, the shots with the ghosts in the mist got reprinted several times. So sometimes the already underexposed shots were duped and cut into the picture, with less than perfect results—accidentally, that made my actual shooting ratio around 0.85 to 1, which means that by duping up much of the ghost footage, I actually achieved the impossible! I used more film than I shot!"

Ask Malanowski what the budget was for *Night of Horror* and he laughs. "I always get a kick out of questions like this! It presupposes that I really had a budget, that this was a professional movie! I remember one reviewer said of *Night of Horror* and *The Curse of the Swampthing* Deep, that they were 'the kind of pictures made to play drive-ins in the South. Like they were shot on 35mm and really played in theatres of any kind, any place! The money raised for the picture came from my own piggy bank. I arranged a semi-open account at Pete's, and, as I said, I bought the raw stock to make sure I was locked into doing the film. Then when I was hanging out with my friend 'Big' John Simmons (a real asshole with a huge heart), I was talking about how I was going to make the picture. John worked for the State as well, on the roads, and he asked if he could toss in a few bucks. I agreed, and John came on as a silent partner (he



Malanowski gained his first practical feature film experience as co-producer and assistant director of *The Alien Factor*. "I put in \$500 cash (as did everyone else) and we formed a company (Cinemagic Visual Effects, based on Don's magazine *Cinemagic*), basically working on percentages. I was supposed to be involved in the editing, but I tore the ligament in my right index finger doing temporary construction work for the money. Remember when we made *The Alien Factor*? I was the assistant partner in the company. I had just turned eighteen years old and still lived at home, so I had a little advantage in the economics department! And since I wanted to learn everything I could, I was always the first to volunteer. I remember one day, Don had to get his two kids from softball practice, and he left me with some notes and told me to direct the scene. It was after Don left as Ben Zachary had killed the interbyee (the bug creature) and he was arguing with Mary Mertens (Carol's then-wife), and George Stover. You can tell I directed that scene because the eye-lines of the actors aren't quite right. The screen direction is wrong—not by much, but it is noticeable. I was kinda hummed by it when I saw it, but everyone else was learning too, so I didn't feel that bad."

Working with Dohler was, for Malanowski, an inspiration and an encouragement to try making movies himself. "Though I had learned a lot doing *The Alien Factor*, there were still many areas of the filmmaking process that I didn't feel I knew well enough. So, I figured that the only way to learn all aspects of making a film, was just to make one from beginning to end. At the time, money was starting to trickle in from *The Alien Factor*, and I had been working as a radiographer technician, structural materials for the Maryland State Highway Administration. I had a few bucks put away, and I figured the time was right. Around this time, I was working with Diane Hammond, who was a marvelous make-up artist in the Washington DC area.² She was going to make a sequel to *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* as a glorified demo reel for her make-up effects. Since I loved the original *Apes* films, I got involved. She introduced me to a group of Virginia-based players which included Jeff Canfield (Gae Schmitt), Rebecca Bach and Mimi Ishikawa. We were all supposed to work on the 'Apes' film (now called *Beyond the Planet of the Apes*). I wrote the first couple of drafts of the screenplay, and was slated to be the DP with Jeff being director. Eventually, since Jeff was more of a theoretician, it became obvious that he wasn't really going to direct a film, especially one that was being shot in Cinemascope! So, after some measure of conflict, I was made director (along with cinematographer), and Jeff would handle directing the dialog. Unfortunately, *Beyond the Planet of the Apes* fell apart just after we had cast the picture, built some of the sets, and made most of the costumes. I figured that, since it wasn't going to happen, it was time for me to do my own picture. At the time, it was still considered an expensive proposition to make an independent film. But, with *The Alien Factor*, I had already seen that it could be made relatively cheaply. And since I was planning on using most of the budget and doing most everything myself, I guessed that the film could be sold rather quickly (the video boom was growing fast) and I could make a profit.



also ran the Nagra and recorded the audio for *Night of Horror* and *Curse*). John put up \$1,000 and received points like everyone else in the picture. The entire 'budget' came to about \$4,000 for everything. But, since I did it to learn filmmaking, you can say that \$4,000 'bought me a college fun degree' – and in about one eighth of the time!

Night of Horror commenced shooting in the summer of 1980 over four weekends, with a couple of extra nights for pickup shots. Malanowski invited Jeff Canfield, Gae Schmitt and Rebecca Bach from the aborted 'Beyond the Planet of the Apes' project to act in it, and added Steve Sandkuhler, a friend at the State Highway Administration who played in a rock group called Off the Wall, as the lead.

Since I was working from script pages, and not a real finished script, the shoots were a little bit chaotic," Malanowski admits, "but everyone pulled together, and worked very hard. I was greatly encouraged by this. Maybe we were all kind of pretending to be working on a film, considering how things were really going. But everyone has to start somewhere."

With the cost of a Hollywood liquid lunch to play with, every decision had to be made with thrift in mind. "I decided on using a camping trip as the premise, because it was cheap!" Malanowski recalls. "All we needed were some trees! Actually, most of the film was shot at John's parents' house. They had a little plot of – and surrounded by trees. We had a dirt road leading in, easy access to electricity, and a place to crash if we shot too late – it was perfect! The house that Jeff and Colleen came out of belonged to John Kirkwood – he was the father of a very close friend named Dave Kirkwood. I met Dave in college and he owned the Bolex 5HM camera that we used for handheld and MOS shots." I eventually shot a bunch of commercials with that camera, and Dave ended up selling it to me, since I always seemed to have it with me! The back of the house was where the door that Chris enters and exits from was located. Also the pool. We had a lot of great parties at that house.

Night of Horror's opening scene, an extended and barely audible conversation between Steve Sandkuhler as Wyan and 'Tony Stark' as his friend Chris, is surely one of the most viewer-unfriendly openings ever achieved in the horror genre. Being a big fan of perverse directorial choices, I asked Malanowski to elaborate: "The bar that Steve sits at was in my brother's basement (it was one of those famous 'club basements' that you find in Maryland). I always found it interesting that some people think that the two were in a public bar, instead of just in some guy's house, which is how it was intended. The reason they were talking so low was that my brother was upstairs studying for a medical exam, and we were being considerate, since he was letting us shoot there and all! 'Big' John was stuffed behind the bar with the Nagra, and the mike was hidden behind the roll of paper towels on the bar! And yes, I was 'Tony Stark' (I also provided the voice of the ghosts, doing my best Dr. Phibes impersonation). I played the part of Chris when my original choice, Chris Gummer (another Dohler alumnus) had to go to a casting call and couldn't make it. So I set up the lights, turned the camera on, and jumped into the scene! I didn't have time to learn the lines (even though I had written them) so Steve and I had our 'scripts' on the bar in front of us. Also, I had the tripod for the camera, but didn't have a 'spreader' – the thing that acts as a base and holds the tripod's legs in place. So we put a throw rug on the tile floor, and just kinda hoped that the

contraption would 'behave'! That's why the camera itself kept slipping, which gave us those 'Dutch angles'."

The idea of resurrected Confederate soldiers, the cornerstone of both Malanowski's films, came from his own fascination with the American Civil War. "That's why I joined the 23rd Army of Northern Virginia prior to starting *Night of Horror*," he says. "I loved the re-enacting part, but I couldn't march worth a darn! The group had weekly meetings in a National Guard Armory in Baltimore and – just couldn't get the hang of simply walking in formation. So, I dropped out shortly after *Night of Horror* was made. It was a great group, and very helpful to me on a personal level. The Civil War battle was shot somewhere in Virginia, I believe. I shot that with Dave's Bolex, and had to stay with the audience – they wouldn't let me on the actual Field of Battle, so you only had the one angle. It gave the film a bit of production value, and most of the re-enactors signed model releases, so it was all legit."

For a horror film about ghostly undead soldiers, *Night of Horror* is, to say the least, sparing in its special effects. "They were handled by Dave Donoho," Malanowski recalls. "He was a physical special effects guy, used black powder and such. I remember that he seemed to have singed off all his fingernails from working with it. He designed a kind of chemically treated newspaper that he crumpled up and set a match to. The paper would then emit a ton of smoke. Dave was introduced to me by Don Dohler, and we used his 'Smoke Paper' extensively in the 'ghost' scenes." As for the film's conspicuous lack of violence, Malanowski is disarmingly candid: "Well, violence costs money! Action? That needs planning. You can't waste time planning when you've got to drive to DC to pick up the equipment! But seriously, I hoped to get a little 'atmosphere', and get some mileage out of the love story. It may have worked with a real script and more experienced actors, but hey – remember to avoid puking just keep repeating 'It's only a glorified student film. It's only a glorified student film'."

Post-production took around six or seven months, allowing for unexpected delays, as Malanowski explains:

When I cut the film together, I found it was too short. That's when I reached onto the extension Lammert shot for his film *The Terror*. He brought back a couple of actors, and had one explain what happened in the film to the other. "Thus were born the opening and closing scenes with – and Chris in the bar." The audio was mixed at a commercial mixing house: "I'll never forget the looks of horror that I kept getting from the owner!" laughs Malanowski. "He'd want to go back and redo something, and I'd say 'No, it's fine, don't worry!' I knew that no amount of 'massaging' would make it sound good, and I just didn't have the money to spend. My feeling was, I learned what I needed to. I was going to at least make my money back (well, almost...), and I didn't see the need to go the extra yard at that point."

Malanowski's mentor at the time, Don Dohler, offered valuable practical assistance, although he was less than encouraging about the actual results: "Don helped me a lot with contacts, especially in distribution. At the time, he was working on a picture (the first *Night Beast*, I think?) and had some camera equipment that he sub-rented to me. It was a CP 16mm camera outfit. Now CP's are notoriously tough to thread – they have a lot of gears and sprockets. Not like the Amiflex cameras, which only need two sprockets. But if the CP camera is 'tight', as this one was



"I won't have a problem. And the camera Don sub-rented to me was a very good one. I think I shot a lot of the sound scenes with that rig. My pickups were all done with Dave's Boitek. When Don watched the workprint to the film, he was kinda appalled. I don't think he got what I was going for. He really thought I had no idea what I was doing."

Malanowski, who ended his association with Doherty not long after pauses and then laughs, "It's funny to look back on it now. Did Don really appreciate that I was doing everything by myself? That there was no crew to speak of? That I was absorbing all of the technical aspects that I could? Well, eventually, bad blood came between Don and myself (this is fairly well documented elsewhere, so I won't go into it now). But, I will say that I now work for a major motion picture studios in Hollywood, pulling in a comfortable six figures, and Don was making digital pictures in Perry Hall, Maryland. So, I guess I knew what I was doing."

Night of Horror is a film with abundant failings, but for its director the important thing was simply to have made something. "Working on *The Alien Factor* was so enjoyable, mostly an ensemble kind of feeling. *Night of Horror* was more of a solo flight, kinda lonely, actually. But I saw it as a step in the right direction. I was reading famous *Monsters* as well as showbusiness biographies, and I didn't see why I couldn't work in the business too. I mean I didn't feel that my dreams were unrealistic, because I wasn't trying to be a movie star, I was going for the technical end. And my story wasn't that much different from the stories of John Landis, Joe Dante, and Roger Corman. They were very pragmatic, and had done my homework. These little films, coupled with the burgeoning Video Revolution, gave me a window of opportunity that I was determined to take advantage of. And, even though it was



only a little film, and we were banging beer cans together because I couldn't always rent a slate, and we only had maximum of three lights at any time, and we didn't have a real script. Well, there was still something magical about standing behind that camera, and saying 'Action'."

Malanowski is as frank in his assessment of the film as he is about the difficulties making it. "Well, it pretty much stunk as badly as I thought it would. I didn't have any illusions. But it was exciting to see my name in the credits as a Director and Producer. It solidly legitimised my dream. If I got hit by a bus the next morning, there was still a picture floating around with my name on it. And the most

Tony Malanowski
"looking like a
Simmons's prop"

4/27/80



Malanowski takes photos of the 14th of 15
phony shoot designed to get
shows *Night of Horror*



THE CURSE OF THE SCREAMING DEAD
MILANOWSKI

important thing was I learned so much - I actually saw where I had made mistakes, had done things wrong. Not so much budgetary problems, because there wasn't much I could do about that, but technical things. I knew that next time I needed to pay more attention to the script and the acting, for example. Plus, I needed more coverage in the editing room. And I was very intrigued by the sound editing. I didn't have a lot of experience, but I knew that I wanted to play around and try things. The process was still amazing me. The feel of putting the project together was wonderful.

With the film completed, a promo was assembled on three-quarter-inch video, and shown to Bruce Kaufman at distributors Alexander Beck. "They looked at the picture and said it was slow, and nothing happens," says Milanowski. "I said that I was aware of that. I wasn't looking for a lot of money - just enough to get me started on the next film. They told me that I should reshoot some new scenes that would play well in a trailer. They suggested standard horror stuff, you know, ghouls coming out of the ground and some blood and guts. With that, they said, they could make good sales on the picture. Well, I had already decided to cut my 'losses' on *Night of Horror*. I guessed (rightly, it turned out), that it would be better to dump the picture elsewhere for whatever I could get, and use the new money (plus the experience) to make another picture. That picture would incorporate these new ideas, would allow me to take the next step in 'quality' and would have as much of a 'guarantee' for success as you could get in the picture business. But I still knew, at that time, that people automatically assumed you needed a lot of money to do even a low-budget film. They couldn't conceive of one person doing all the work. So that gave me an advantage. Nowadays, with digital cameras and the like, well, you aren't fooling anyone. But back then, so. I topped my budget a little, was wiser in my job as director/producer, took my time, and obeyed the distributors. I figured I could do alright. That was the starting point for *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*.

Night of Horror Redux! Or The Curse of the Screaming Dead

With the money given by Alexander Beck to add gore scenes to *Night of Horror*, Milanowski set out instead to remake it. The result, *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*, is as flawed but it's a big leap on from its forebear. As Samuel Beckett once said "Far, again, far, better" - a mantra dear to discouragement and despair that Milanowski's films illustrate perfectly. *Night of Horror* is probably only compelling if you're a student of low-budget cinema - if you've got a screw loose. *Curse*, on the other hand, is fun to watch, achieves many of its simple aims, and won't get you beaten up for recommending it to your friends. And if like me you find a certain beauty in images of people chewing guts, then even poetry gets a look-in.

The first lesson Milanowski learned from *Night of Horror* was that it's a good idea to spend some time on your script. "I didn't have a final script for *Night of Horror*, it was mostly just a few pages of dialogue, some disjointed scenes that I kinda made up as I went along. For *Curse*, I decided right away that I needed a real script, a story that was better structured and thought out. Since we were going to basically 'remake' *Night of Horror* - adding what the distributors thought necessary to sell the picture - we already had the basic framework. I had a friend in San Rafael, a city just north of San Francisco, named Lon Huber. Lon was a writer and burgeoning sound designer, so I asked if he would be interested in writing the script based on my outline. He thought it was a good idea, and also asked to help with some of the sound effects. The sound work Lon did most often entailed going out into the fields with a friend and recording some gunshots at varying speeds. These were used in the film, and, to this day, when I cut and design sound effects, I always prefer recording new effects where feasible. They always have a better, more realistic 'feel' to the ear than 'library' or 'canned' effects. Or I mix canned effects with similar sounds from the production tracks to sweeten the overall effect. The other main contribution from Lon - and it was a big one - was the audio of the actual screams of the 'Screaming Dead'. That was Lon and a few friends tearing up the place, which is how we did the project.

When *Night of Horror* had been paid for almost entirely by Milanowski, *Curse* benefited from a handful of other investors. Besides selling long cheques from *The Alien Factor* from our TV syndication deal, Big John Simmons dropped another \$1,000 into the pot, and Pete Carey made another deal at the lab. But this time, I guess based on my enthusiasm and the fact that I actually made *Night of Horror*, we got a couple of outside investors, my sister Rebecca Bach, and Richard Ruxton and Bump Roberts, who played the two cops in the film. Dick and Bump wanting to invest was a surprise - I hadn't expected that other people would be at all interested in my dream. I guess it helped that I was giving investors gross points, which means they start getting their money back from dollar one, right along with me. I think that sounded like a good deal to them, that I was being honest. To me, I was keeping as much of the final profit potential myself (by doing all the work), that I could afford to allow some points out. I even gave some upfront money to the players - not a lot certainly, but something.

He continues, "This time my deal with the Quality Film Labs would cover all the lab work through a final answer print. That meant no matter how much trouble I

not into budget-wise. I would still be able to have the work done, with an open end to how long it would take to pay off that cost. The other consideration, and it was an important one, was that I suddenly found myself working for Pete at the job. I went in one day to pick up something, and Pete was bemoaning the fact that a new employee had run off. Pete's was a 'Mum and Pop' kind of business - he had only one other full-time employee, and his kids would sometimes come in to work. So I said, 'Hey, what about me?' Pete didn't think I was serious at first, but I needed a job and it seemed like a perfect fit.

The Curse of the Screaming Devil went before the camera in the first week of October 1981. Malanowski's new job dovetailed neatly (if exhaustingly) with the shoot. "I worked Monday through Friday at Pete's. I would leave the lab (which was in Towson, Maryland just outside of Baltimore) in the late afternoon on Friday, and drive about forty miles to Washington DC to pick up the equipment. Then I would drive directly to the location to meet the cast, and start setting up. We'd shoot Friday night, crash at the location then get up and shoot Saturday during the day, and then at night. We repeated the process for Sunday. Then, I'd crash late Sunday night and have to get up early Monday morning to take the equipment back to DC, then get to the lab by 9 a.m. for work. I got to process my own film in the regular developing run, and, since it was a reversal film, I could check out the original as it was spooling through the dryer onto the take-up reel! That way I could get a decent idea of how the shots turned out! Let me tell you, you don't know pressure until you run the machines that process your own film!

The shoot brought Malanowski's first brush with exploitation, although the inclement October weather hindered any potential eroticism. "I was worried because it was so cold and we had a scene with the girls in bikinis. It was a totally gratuitous scene - just to show some skin, but I was worried that they would be uncomfortable. If the weather was too chilly, I even planned on shooting the scene in my bathing suit, just to show them that I wouldn't ask them to do something I wouldn't. The day we shot that scene, however, I forgot my bathing suit, and ending up just taking my jacket and shirt off! I guess the effect was the same."

Malanowski's problem this time was to shoot with the main cast over three weekends, then do pick-ups as needed, with most of the more difficult scenes, like the zombies coming out of the ground and the attack on the house, filmed separately later. However, circumstances dictated otherwise. That first weekend, when I went to DC to pick up my camera film, they did not have what I ordered. I had reserved an Arriflex BL 68mm camera, but they had rented it to someone else, leaving only a CP16 camera. Well, as you remember, a CP has many gears, and it's a pain in the ass. And if you don't thread it just right, (or if the camera is f---ed up), you get a blurred image. That happened so often the film world came up with a derisive name for it: the 'CP Shuffle.' Well, I was stuck, and I had used a CP before on *Night of Horror*, so I figured I'd just go with it. We got to our location, which was a large horse ranch outside of Edgewater City in Maryland. I set up, and we started shooting with the cast walking through the trees, trying to get most of Mimi's scenes done first, because she wasn't 'local.' We shot for three days (and into the evenings). Come Monday morning, I take the CP back and speed up to Pete's where I start loading my film in the magazines in the darkroom.

Since we wouldn't run that machine until later in the day, I left the film closed in the magazine, waiting in the darkroom for a few hours. Finally, the machine was ready, and I started the processing run. Now, I had shot a few thousand feet of 16mm film, and as it was coming out of the dryer, something didn't look right! My heart just sank! We should be on a projector (with a shutter separator - the frames), I couldn't be positive, but it sure looked like a kind of 'glow' was hanging over my actors. It seemed like forever until I could break down a roll and put it on a projector, where my worst fears were then confirmed. Every damn foot of that shoot had died and 'CP Shuffle' on it. It was all ruined, totally worthless. I just couldn't believe the bad luck.

Another unexpected problem arose with the prop designer. Dave Donoho had made me graveyard headstones out of Styrofoam. I drilled them up a little, but kept them their original white colour. Well, on screen, those things flared out like mini-A-Bomb blasts! More unusable footage. Well, it all became moot point within a week. Seems I never really studied the anatomy of a cemetery in Maryland very closely. The next weekend we drove to the same horse ranch and discovered that almost every damned leaf had fallen off the trees! Even without the 'CP Shuffle' I would have had to reshoot for the difference in the trees! But actually, it turned out for the best. The trees were now giant and dead-looking, making for a better background, (esp. at night). Plus, I had a chance to paint the headstones. Dave Donoho told me not to use oil-based paint, as it would eat the Styrofoam, so I bought some acrylic spray-paint in a flat grey, but also a small can of oil-based grey paint. By using the oil-based paint in small amounts, I could cause pitting and texture in the Styrofoam. Then, I painted the whole thing over with the acrylic. It really looked convincing. I still have those headstones, and loan them out for Halloween parties!

Thanks to the difficulties, shooting extended into spring of 1982, with Malanowski deciding on the need for further pick-up shots during the editing process, grabbing his Bolex and adding or reshooting material where needed. We did the scene where Rebecca Bach, as Sarah, falls off the cross in the graveyard the morning of New Year's Day 1982, he recalls. "Boy, were we hung over. Since the cross was also made of Styrofoam, Rebecca couldn't actually sit on it. The script indicated, I just had her sort of lean on it. It didn't make much sense even when you think about it in context, but we weren't feeling too good that morning. We shot on the horse ranch, which was owned by a friend named Randy Robbins. He had a small cottage that crashed in, though some of us actually stayed in the tents that we used in the film. After the second weekend, it got too cold at night, so we all ended up inside. We shot the opening camper shots, and some of the night footage there. The house we used was the one that Jim Bail was renting. I think a couple of people stayed there. It was three stories, with that great porch! We shot the scenes with the cops there as well, and some of the soldiers attacking the house, you know, coming out of the woods. The old ruined church we used was right up the street. I don't know who owned it, we just sorta used it! It might have been County property. I think it looked great! The first zombie attack and most of the tent scenes were shot in Chris Guttman's back yard - the 'Gutman Backlot' we called it."

As difficulties arose, anything that could possibly benefit a shot was pressed into service. One night, the lamps started flickering out, and with no spare bulbs, lighting was becoming more and more difficult. "It got to the point where I pulled





my blue Pinto car up to the actors, and put the high beams on!" laughs Malanowski. "Chris even brought out a red healing lamp that we used in close-ups of the ghouls anything that would help

The last scene to be shot was a genuinely effective coming-out-of-the-grave sequence. "We did that one in Mark Redfield's back yard," Malanowski recalls. "Mark played Captain Mahler and did a lot of make-up effects. So he did his own make-up as the undead Captain. He had a real beard, but, for some reason, he shaved the darn thing out before we shot. So he had to create a false beard, which never really matched. Some reviewers even think he is a different ghoul, so I guess it's okay! Those last scenes were intercut with some shots I had already done at Jim Bull's house. Hey, talk about an *auteur*! I even dug the holes for most of the graves!"

One thing that's noticeable when watching Malanowski's films together is that the actors are far more animated and confident in the second outing. This was in part down to having the first film for reference as a 'how-not-to' guide, and also due to Lon Huber's script. "Lon did a great job of fleshing out the personalities of the people in the story. We took more time with it, since it was the most glaring problem with the first film. Now we had a complete script, written by, of all things, a writer! The players had something to work with, and I think it showed, especially Rebecca Bach and Steve Sandakubier. Now both of them were in *Night of Horror*, but they were so much more accomplished in *Curse*, which was only shot a year later."

Malanowski is unfailingly generous when discussing his cast. Jim was a member of Steve's group Off the Wall and was recommended when I was having a hard time filling that slot in the cast. He was very personable and had done some acting, so it wasn't much of a stretch to bring him aboard. I think he did very well. He was mostly at ease in front of the camera, which is so important in low-budget filmmaking. I'm glad I agreed to including him before I found out that he brought along that big house as a location! It might have been prejudicial in my judgement at the time! Jim's best scenes were in him' it up with Mel played by Chris Guimter. Chris was a friend from the old *Allen Funt* days. He could play a very forceful character, and we chose to have him be the 'bad guy' in our film. Mimi Ishikawa as 'Hind Kiyomi' was industrious, hard working, and most of all very photogenic, and incred bly cute! I guess I can be honest and say that I regret putting 'Blind' into the credits, when referring to the character. I originally thought that it added a kind of dignity, like the character Susan the Silent in *Finian's Rainbow*. But, it only seemed to make the character stand out for ridicule, and I'm sorry for that. The other problem was, after we had to reshoot for the 'CP Shuffle' hassles, Mimi came up with an idea. Instead of using the standard 'Blind Look' that a sighted person usually employs when playing a blind person, she thought that her character might seem normally sighted when standing or sitting in one place, but revert to a modified version of the 'Blind Look' when moving or reaching for something. That sounded great to me, and I told her to try it. Well, we shot most of her scenes that second weekend, and when I got the footage back, I realised that it just didn't work. The theory was fine, but the look just seemed incongruous. We changed it for her final scenes, but the damage was done. Especially in close-ups, it really called attention to itself. I hoped that her performance otherwise would cover up these problems. I thought she was especially good in the scene in the tent

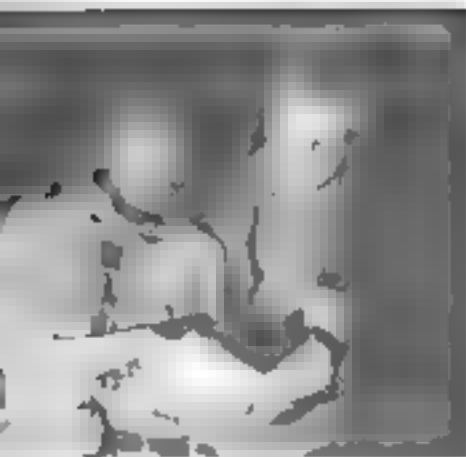


where she talked about losing her puppy when she was younger. Now Mimi was part Japanese, so I needed another Asian actress to play her sister. A friend suggested a woman who was from Korea - she was a war bride, actually. We met her, but she was a little older than the part as written. I figured we could probably pull it off with a little script change, but then she suggested her daughter. That's how we found Judy Dixon. I met with Judy, and she was quite excited to get the part. She had a little stage experience, I believe, but she read and I knew she could handle it. Richard Raxton (Dick McLung) had met through Don Dubler, and he brought along Bump Roberts (R Sommerwerk). I thought they did a great job! They wore old Baltimore County Police jackets that I got through a surplus house. And Dick was named 'Captain Fritz' after the Maryland State Police Officer who pulled Big John and myself over on one of our more boisterous outings!"

During the scenes where zombies emerge from the graveyard, any flashes of light can be seen in the darkness. Malanowski laughs when I ask what they were. "Oh, yeah those! Somehow, the idea came up to have glowing lights over the gravestones as the ghouls came out of the ground. That's why the characters are talking about lights over at the old church. The idea was to make it a little more of a 'mystical' event, while also giving another bit of production value for the distributors. Dan Taylor would've never let me have money for optical effects like those, and I didn't have it in the budget, so I couldn't impose on him. So what I *did* manage to do was to get some little powder-filled cones from Dave Donoho. These were about an inch tall, and when lit, would produce a white flash every few seconds. I thought I needed *something* to get the players' attention, you know, that something was happening at the graveyard. So one night I took those 'cones', and my Bolex, out in Dundalk to a local shopping area. They were building an extra parking lot in the area, so I parked my Pinto, set up my Bolex, and lit my cones! Well, those little suckers started spitting out flashes all over the place. I thought I'd shoot a bunch from different angles, and superimpose them over the already-shot footage of the ghouls coming out of their graves! Well, I shot a few takes, and in the distance, I heard fire trucks! And I

Judy Dixon and Mimi Ishikawa in *Curse of the Screaming Dead*

Two confederate zombies prepare to enter the farmhouse where the last humans have taken refuge from *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*



THE CURSE OF THE SCREAMING DEAD

"I think too much about it – I was kept shooting, but they sounded like they were coming closer! Well, the whole truth went off over my head, and I took the roll into my Pinto and sped off! In my terror I could see a couple of fire trucks pulling up and turning into that park – heh! On a similar subject, I needed some shots of fireworks going off when the guys throw the bag of fireworks into the campfire to distract the zombies. I knew that the Baltimore Orioles were having a fireworks display at one of their games at old Memorial Stadium on 33rd Street, so off I went with my ubiquitous Belex to grab what I could. I parked a couple blocks away and waited. When the display started I filmed several shots using the zoom lens on the camera. Then the roll of film ran out and I just put the roll back in, and exposed it again. I thought it would double-expose more fireworks, and would have twice as much on the roll as I could then superimpose over the ghouls. Well, putting the film back in the camera without rewinding it first, meant that you had two exposures of fireworks – one going forward normally, and the other going backwards! It dawned on me on the off the truck home, but by then it was too late. When I saw it, it looked kinda silly, but I had a deadline and nothing else to use.

A highlight of the film is the police captain's theory that the zombies are merely a prank staged by psychopaths who are stealing bodies and rigging them up on wires. That was all in Lon's original script. Every word. Including the voice on the radio is mine. I also did the crying sounds that Franklin makes as he is attacked by the zombies, plus the scream that Captain Mahler gives when he stumbles upon his men eating the bodies. Oh, and Rebecca Bach and I perform most of the sounds of the zombies eating the guts.

Oh, the gut-chewing scenes – where Malanowski's film earns its exploitation stripes and at last joins the grisly legions following George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*. As actors choomp into glistening entrails, with nary a flinch, the starved viewer wonders how on Earth Malanowski persuaded his cast to be

"Everyone got into it! I guess you're asking because much has been made about the zombie extras in *Night of the Living Dead* getting grossed out by the real animal parts that were obtained from a slaughterhouse. Well, I read those interviews too! But, even more relevant, I was a vegetarian at the time, and thought phoney entrails made from latex would be better all round – and they were. Larry Schlechter (who created the 'In-erbvee' creature in *The Alien Factor*) made a stomach piece for me, which could fit on an adult's belly. This was big enough to have a few 'organs' and 'entrails' stuffed inside, which were made out of upholstery foam, covered with latex. The ghouls could simply pull these out as needed! Pour some Dave Donoho 'blood' all over everything, and you had yourself an instant gross-out! But guess we did that part right, because reviewers *always* cite that scene, and say that we used real animal parts! And, as the blooper reel attests, the players had a lot of fun with the gut eating scenes!"

Adding to the much improved goriness of *The Curse of the Screaming Dead* are some capably grotesque zombie make-ups. Malanowski explains how they came about: "I had started teasing with Fred Ray, who was down in Florida, prior to his move to Los Angeles. He gave me the name of Bart Mixon, who did make-up effects in Texas. Bart agreed to do a set of pull-over zombie masks for me. He had sent me a resume and pictures of his work, and it was obvious that he could do it. I thought having these ready to wear masks would help me time-wise, and could also add numbers to any scene where I needed background zombies. The only 'main' mask was the one that would become 'the Flag-wearer'. But worked from the description Lon had written in the script, and I think that mask was particularly effective. I remember that Bart wanted \$150 for the job to cover expenses. The rest would be points and a credit – and he wanted the masks back at the end of shooting! We also had several other make-up artists on the shoot. As I noted, Larry Schlechter did our guts and that stomach piece, and Mark Redfield did most of our main 'highlight' ghouls. When we did the final coming-out-of-the-grave sequence in Mark's backyard, I had brought some friends over, and Mark made up his brother, Eric. One of the guys had brought along his girl friend, and I stuck a mask on her and added her to the group. Steve's wife Linnea had done some stage make-up, and he suggested that she would like to come along and help out. You can tell Linnea's ghouls – they have the white, pasty looking faces with a few highlights. Mark's ghouls have a heavier base, with darker highlights. And the blood was made up by the gaffer on by Dave Donoho. Dave also made some blood pools that he carried around with him. They were done on wax paper sections – he mixed gelatine with food colouring, and painted it out onto the wax paper. When it dried, it looked like pools of blood that you could just lay on the floor and touch up with a bit of fresh liquid. Pretty clever!"

He continues: "The costumes were leftovers from the Civil War re-enactment group. One was an artillery shell jacket with sergeant's stripes, another was a straightfornare grey jacket. That became Captain Mahler's costume, along with an old, floppy grey country hat of mine. Since I knew costumes would be a problem, I had told Lon to put something in the script to help us out! So Lon duly wrote the section of the diary where Captain Mahler exercised, '...most are boys, clad only in rags'.

If *The Curse of the Screaming Dead* has a problem, it's that the comings and goings of the characters are hard to follow, as they split up or disappear from the frame rather

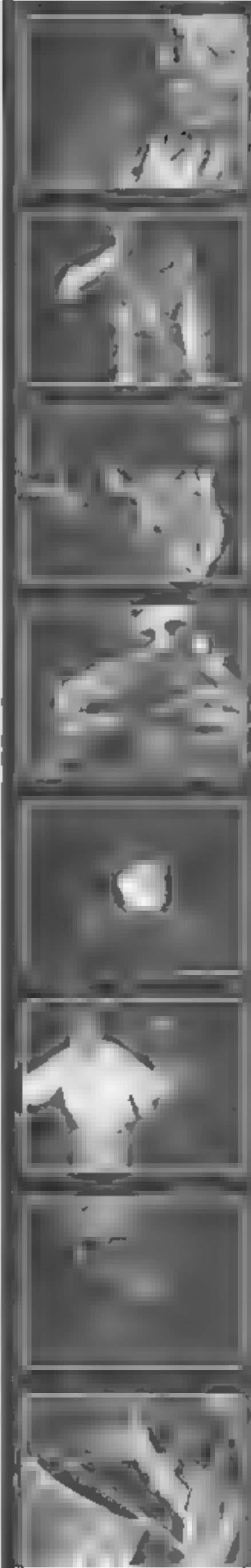


haphazardly. Mazanowski acknowledges the problem, but explains, "Well, Lon was very familiar with the kind of film I was making. He kept scenes almost as separate vignettes, to help facilitate the shooting. This did tend to make it a little choppy, but I felt that was an acceptable trade-off. And I probably made it worse by shooting around people's schedules. I'd have people walk into a scene and sit down and you wouldn't see them for the rest of that scene. This was because, if someone could only give me a half day, then I got them in and out in a half day. Even with storyboards it's hard to see how something will work until you put it together. A good example of that, is checking out the various Kiyomi body doubles, wearing that long, black Ha'loween wig! The red and black flannel shirt that Mimi wore in the film was mine. I deliberately had her wear that, because I knew I would be using body doubles to cover for her being away at college! That's another reason why she passes out in the script, and has to be carried all over the place by Mel Must of the time, it's really my sister Ann or Jim Bann's then friend Radio that Chris is schlepping around! But, again, all of those problems sure seemed to melt away once I got into the cutting room, and starting piecing it all together. It's so magical—just going through the actual process of putting a film together. At that time, I was editing in a room where the players were my friends. But I knew this project would lead to other films where I would be editing scenes with actual, well-known stars. And within a few short years, I would be editing Tony Curtis, Glenn Ford, Angela Lansbury, Roddy McDowall, et al. That's what I was selling myself on, as I edited away in my parents' basement and garage. I got some flack occasionally, one uncle recently said, 'You know, behind closed doors, none of us thought you'd ever really amount to much! But... kept going!'

At the editing stage, Mazanowski adored the score for the film by Charlie Barnett. Unlike many ultra-romantic films of the period, Barnett's score is surprisingly sophisticated, sounding more like the Mike Westbrook Orchestra than the regulation droning synth so far from the genre. "You're the second person to mention a similarity between Charlie's score and Mike Westbrook," says Mazanowski. "I've never heard Mike's work, so I can't say I believe Charlie was recommended by a friend of Gus Schmitt. As I recall, Gus had a friend who did some experimental pieces for another zombie film that I was thinking about doing. I remember his work was very good, but when time came to actually do the film, he was unavailable. But he was in touch with Charlie, and we arranged to meet. Well, Charlie showed up at my place wearing a tie! He introduced himself, and I promptly told him to remove the tie! I said that we were going to have our meeting up the street in a local lounge. So we got in the car, and I took Charlie (now minus his tie) to the bar. We had a great meeting, and we pretty much agreed to work together. At that point, Charlie was a 'classical score' kind of guy. He wanted to get some of his friends from the Kennedy Center and the Washington Opera to come down and record. I told him that I didn't think I could afford that, but he said he'd pull in a few favours. Well, being a producer as well as a composer, Charlie wrangled quite a few friends. I don't remember the exact amount. I'd guess ten or twelve musicians, but they were all real pros. Also, Charlie wrote in a very clever way. He did a couple of main pieces, some transitional pieces, and some 'stingers' for accenting. By mixing and matching, the score could be made to sound more complex and varied than it really was. This also gave the musicians less actual music

to learn, and kept down our time in the studio. On the day of the recording session I bought a couple of cases of beer and sodas for the guys. I remember carrying them into the studio myself. Charlie later told me that the assembled musicians asked him who I was, and he told them, 'That's the producer!' The guys were so impressed by the fact that 'The Producer' was schlepping drinks for the band that they immediately agreed to stay longer than planned, if we needed extra time. That always stuck with me, that those guys could see how much I was trying to cut corners and all but also was keeping their comfort in mind as much as could. The recording session went really well. Charlie sure knew what he was doing. All told, I think we came out with about forty minutes of score! It felt positively uplifting listening to a live performance of what would be the score for your own feature film!

Mazanowski was now far more optimistic about *Curse's* chances in the marketplace. "Well, since the entire production was designed around the distributor's ideas about what would sell, I didn't expect any problems. In the first couple of shoots, I got enough material, including some of the 'money' shots with the ghouls, to make a decent promo. I rushed that up to Bruce Kaufman, since Alexander Deek was in the film market, and they needed any kind of a promo as soon as possible. Surprisingly enough, I was called right after the market, and told me that they had pre-sold the picture in the United Kingdom for \$15,000! How soon could I get it? Man, I was pretty bowled over by that news. It sure sounded like everything was going along according to plan. By this time, I had cut a lot of the footage together, and needed only pieces of scenes and the scale scene of the ghouls coming out of their graves. This did take a little longer than Bruce wanted. I eventually had to rush through the audio mix to deliver the movie. Then the U.K. agents started quibbling over the picture, but we eventually agreed on the price, and they accepted the film—once I threatened to pull it from them! I went back into the studio and redid the mix, adding some things and taking a little more time with it. That became the official 'final' version of the picture. I don't know if that early mix still exists in the UK, or not. Apparently, we were even pirated in a couple of territories. New Zealand was one. Since *Curse* had a final cost of about \$2,000 (including the rental of the soundtrack), I was actually seeing some money. I think the distribution fee was fairly high, maybe 40% or so. But I was new to the game, so I couldn't complain. I figured that later in my career I would have more leverage on making deals, and that is pretty much how it turned out. I remember one funny distribution story. Bruce called me and told me that he had interest from an agent who represented Canadian video stores. They were offering, I think, \$4,000 for the film. Only, they wanted to change the title to *The South Shutt Run Again*, which was the tag line for the picture. When Bruce told me that, I readily agreed to the change. I had already told the agent that the title change would be acceptable. Don't you need to check with the producer?" The Canadian agent asked Bruce. "Look, I know the producer," Bruce answered. "You can change the name of the picture to *My Bar Mitzvah* for all he cares, just as long as you pay him! Now how's that for a distributor who's looking out for you? By this time, I had made a sale for *Night of Horror*, and Bruce sold me a domestic video deal with Moga for *Curse*. They made up a superb ad campaign with a full colour painting of a ghoul eating some red flesh. Bruce sent me ads from video trade magazines, and I could





Mark Radfeld works on a zombie for *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*. Mark also played the head ghoul "Zarzar Men"

see how the picture was being marketed. Later, we were setting up an outright sale deal on *NightBears* to Troma. I thought that it would be good to get a final deal for cash, since my main sales through Bruce and Alex were slowing down. This worked out fine for me. I was able to get \$12,000 from Troma which, when coupled with the money I was making as a Special Commissioned Officer with the Maryland State Police (don't ask...), would finally give me the seed money to move to Los Angeles."

Looking back at the second movie, Malanowski feels justifiably pleased: "I think it was a lot better than it had any right to be. I was much happier with the acting, the story, the editing, pretty much an improvement in all areas. Still, there was so much more I would have liked to do if I had the time and the money. I envisioned an opening sequence under the credits that showed, via flashback, the Confederate soldiers being tortured. But, I would have needed to shoot it on a sound stage with some wagon props, cannons, union uniforms, et al. Just no way I could have afforded that."

His next remarks raise the possibility of yet another treatment of the Undead Confederates story - truly the concept that wouldn't die: "I have toyed with the idea of somehow remaking the film, and shooting the script I have for the sequel (*Revenge of the Screaming Dead*) at the same time. But, I'm doing so much better now working on other people's projects, that I just don't feel the need to do the same story for a third time! I will get back into production someday, probably within the next five years, the way that my company is going."

After directing *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*, Malanowski moved into sound and film editing for a string of exploitation notables of the eighties and nineties beginning with Fred Olen Ray: "I packed my car and drove out to Hollywood in 1987. I started working immediately for Fred Ray where I did the sound editing/design for *Phantom Empire*, *Evil Spawn* (I also re-edited the picture), and *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers* (I was also the assistant editor). Then, I moved over to work for Dave DeCoteau - cut picture and sound on *Nightmare Sisters* and *Death Embrace*. Then, I cut picture for *Dr. Alien*, *Ghettoblaster* and *Ghost Writer*. I next became the house editor for Action International Pictures (another AIP Studios!). They also hired me to first cut sound (*Future Zone*, *Deadly Dancer*, *Final Sanction*), then picture and sound (*Raw Nerve*, *Cyber of the Web*, *Mardi Gras for the Devil*, *Good Cop/Bad Cop*). As these were for director David Prior. When David left AIP I went with him, and cut *Felony* and *Mutant Species*. I did several other smaller-budget films, and then joined

Scott MacQueen in the restoration dept at the Walt Disney Studios. There, I did a slew of pictures including the full-scale restorations of *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, *The Happiest Millionaire*, the *Davy Crockett* TV shows and *Fantasia*. I moonlighted at Crest Labs in Hollywood, doing element evaluation and digital spotting for most of the Anchor Bay titles, and then worked for two years editing and producing DVDs for Disney. I'm especially proud of the work I did on the DVDs of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Old Yeller*, *Swiss Family Robinson* and *High Fidelity*. I oversaw the mix on the deleted scenes for *Unbreakable* and the director's cut of *Nixon*. All in all, I worked on dozens of pictures in various capacities. I would even cut promos and trailers on the side. Then, I got into TV restoration with Ascent Media. I recut the first two seasons of *thirtysomething*, and am now heading up the recut of all nine seasons of *Seinfeld* for DVD - a multi-million dollar contract.

And the moral of the story? I'll leave the final word to Malanowski: "And all of this is through my company Little Warsaw Productions - the exact same production company that brought you *Night of Horror*! I owe it all (I repeat *all*) to the experience I got from making *Night of Horror* and *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*!"

1 Van Der Beek is an experimental filmmaker and animator whose 1964 film *Death Breath* Terry Gilliam says inspired his animation style.

2 Amongst those learning their craft on *The Alien Factor* was production assistant John Duda, who went on to design the monster for Doherty's *NightBears* and, most notably, the amazing monsters in Douglas McKeown's *The Death-Spirits* - see interview with McKeown.

3 Hammond went on to do make-up on such films as *The Basketball Diaries* and *Minority Report*.

4 The origin of this term is uncertain and hotly debated, but it either means "Major Only Sound", "Minus Optical Sound" or "Mute Out Sound" - the latter supposedly resulting from a German director asking for a shot "without sound" in a thick accent! Basically, MOS indicates a shot taken without sound.

5 Doherty began and then abandoned a version of *NightBears* before starting again and completing a second version.



Punished By the Sun

Marc B. Ray on *Scream Bloody Murder*

Scream Bloody Murder (1972)

Marc Ray's *Scream Bloody Murder* is often confused with Robert Emery's Florida-shot character piece of the same name, which is a known as *It's About the Bad Dreams*. Purely by coincidence, both films were released in 1972, which has led many a reference work to confuse them. Emery's film has a slow burn style of its own and is definitely worth seeing, but Ray's film is the bigger crowd-pleaser, featuring a host of gruesome details and a pleasingly lurid visual style.

You know you're in for something special when the pre-credits sequence shows Matthew as a young boy (a M Jones) in die family orange groves, deliberately driving a bulldozer over his father (Ron Max). Somehow, though, he falls off and gets his hand mashed beneath the vehicle's wheels – surely the epitome of the 'bizarre gardening accident'. This blatantly Occipital opening riff is dressed up with weird camera angles and wide-angle lenses, giving the film its first blast of lunatic energy. (It's interesting to note that director Marc Ray also wrote Thomas A. Derman's horror flick *The Severed Arm* the same year.)

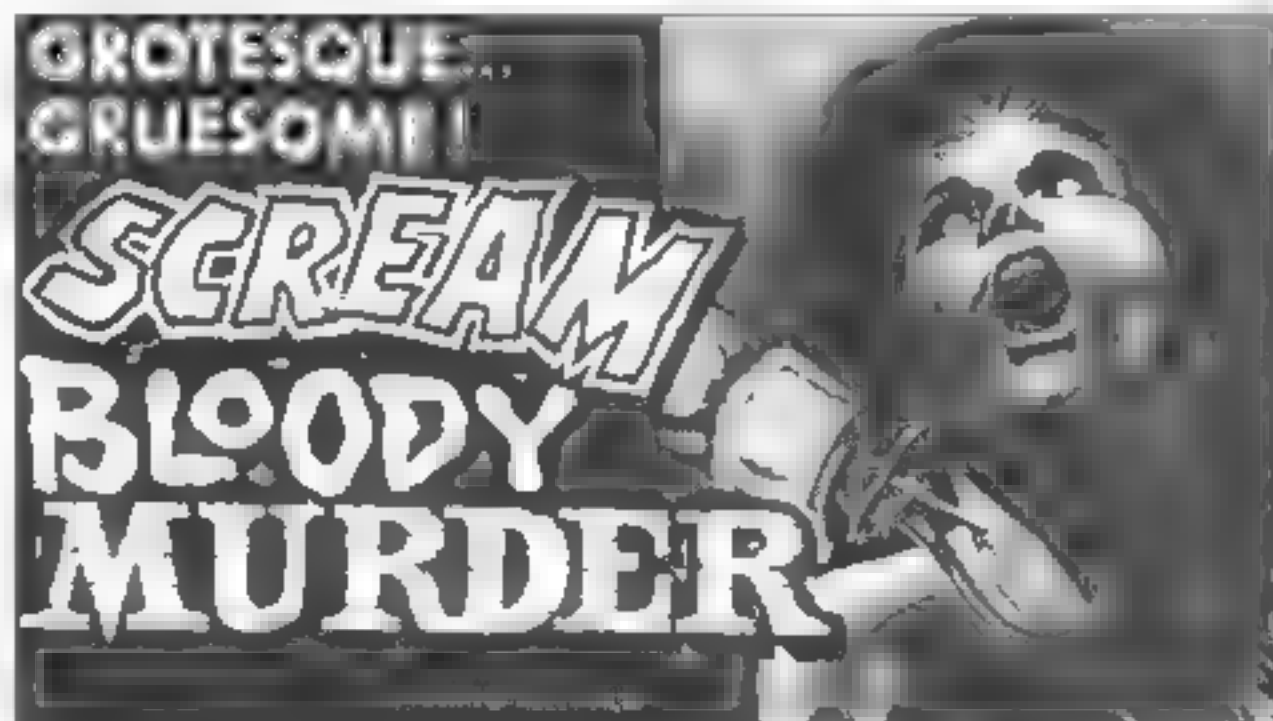
The story proper begins ten years later. Returning home unannounced from the nuthouse, his crushed hand now replaced with a hi-tech claw, Matthew (Fred Hoibert), arrives just in time to see his newly remarried momma (Lough Mitchell) canoodling with husband number two (Robert Knox). This is hardly the homecoming he's been anticipating, and it's not long before he expresses his displeasure by gruesomely axing the interloper (in a scene which appears slightly cut for the UK video release). Understandably, momma takes a dim view of this, and in the ensuing struggle she falls, bashing her brains out on a rock. Taking to the road, the deeply disturbed Matthew accepts a lift from a young couple (Suzette Hamilton and Wiley Reynolds), only to murder them too, haltingly stating that they're his mother and her new husband. Such visions will haunt him throughout the movie. He winds up broke at Venice Beach, and falls into conversation with a young woman called Vera (Lough Mitchell, again), a hooker whom he sees painting abstract canvasses on the porch of her wooden shack. Matthew resolves to 'save' her from the men who 'defile' her, but first he needs a home somewhere impressive to woo his new love. With this in mind, he walks his way into an uptown mansion, murders the occupant, and *wola!* Posing as the wealthy son of a millionaire, he lures Vera back to the house. However

Vera disappoints Matthew by declining to move in, so he trusses her up in the bedroom – she's going to live with him, like it or not. All seems hopeless for Vera, until she realises there's one weapon she can use to intimidate Matthew – her body.

I know, I know – another flick about a momma-obsessed nut on a killing spree. Stay with it though, because there's enough oddity and imagination in the staging of this tale to make it fly. The premise may be shop-worn, but *Scream Bloody Murder* is top quality exploitation: it's well shot, fairly well acted, and the killings are bloody and alarming, not to mention generously scattered throughout the film. Ten murders in seventy-five minutes is pretty fine for a film made in 1972! Matthew's axing of his stepfather is a grisly montage of chopping and bleeding, while the death of the momma (A. Maana Taneiah), hacked to death with a meat cleaver in a white-tiled kitchen (all the better to smear with blood), is an OTT mélange of wild camerawork, cheap gore and piercing screams that brings to mind the climax of *Don't Look in the Basement*, made the same year. The murder of one of Vera's clients, a sailor (Ron Bastone), is also impressively nasty – he's slashed across the face with a palette knife then stabbed through the palm of his outstretched hand, in a sequence that wouldn't look out of place in a Dario Argento film.

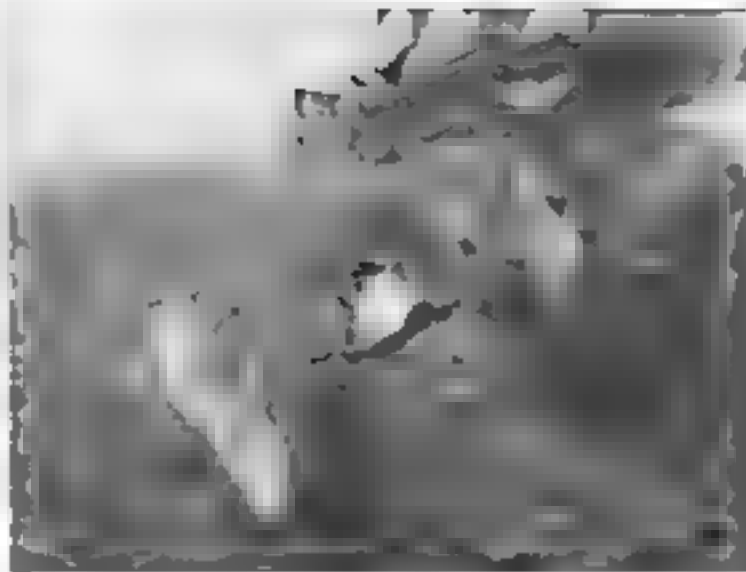
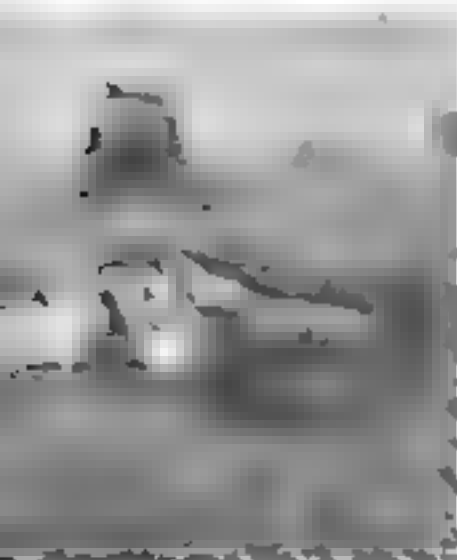
Given its excessive qualities, I'm surprised that the film is so infrequently reviewed. Most of the brochure

Admit for *Scream Bloody Murder*
the film to John B. Kelly. Who? Is
his name is funny, a
movie. Marc Ray comments "I don't
who John B. Kelly is and we
to be attached to me." [View](#)





Scream Bloody Murder gets off to a great



horrors of the seventies have had their champions, but *Scream Bloody Murder* is relatively uncelebrated. True, Matthew – played with grim-faced intensity by Fred Holbert – is not one of the more sympathetic psychos of the cinema: indeed I spent much of the second half of the film willing someone to kill him. He's a prudish, mother-fucked killy boy, how's that for an understatement?), convinced that decent women should hate sex, and he bends every situation into an opportunity to relieve his Oedipal rage. This is one serial killer whose bad attitude is not mercifully polished up to make him a sleazy audience surrogate. Fixated on the notion of his mother's 'purity' and regarding with thin-lipped hatred anyone he sees as a 'corrupter', he's unlikely to set the stalls cheering *a la* Jason Voorhees, which deflects all sympathy onto his hapless victims.

It's interesting to contrast Holbert's performance with that of John Ampias in George Romero's *Martin*. The prosaic voice and demeanour are very similar, and the characters are roughly the same age and build, but Matthew lacks Martin's self-consciousness. Matthew's spitefulness towards women, his self-obsessiveness and lack of empathy, are actually closer to the serial-killer mark than Romero's creation who despise being one of the most intricately drawn characters in the entire horror genre, seems to exist outside of therapeutic realism. *Scream Bloody Murder* is like *Martin* without the sleight of hand that turns a killer into a tragic anti-hero: there's nothing sweetly sorrowful about this guy. Even when Matthew callously slaughters the maid and the old lady, then sobs as he kills her dog, he merely demonstrates a typical attitude among murderers (Myra Hindley for example), who often reserve tender feelings for animals that they withhold from human beings.

Despite the claustrophobia, the goriness, and the fundamentally downbeat premise, Stephen Burum's ague camerawork and the rather campy 'afternoon TV' score ensure the film is impossible to take too seriously. Matthew's insane visions of blood-caked ghoul-women provide both scares and visual amusement, cackling and taunting like the female apparitions in *The Evil Dead*, they are shot using a filter beloved of psychedelically inclined directors, with waves of 'transparent treacle' appearing to wash over the image. Far out, man. That's not to say all the laughs are accidental: when Vera asks Matthew what he can see in her painting, he gazes at the abstract mulch for a while and says he sees a figure.

He's been punished by the sun, he's been punished for

chopping up the man who took his mother away from him. "I didn't know I was such a good artist," Vera

There's humour too in the way that Ray stages the sequence in which Matthew sets himself up as a phoney 'mad genius's son' – it's shot with a directness of purpose that matches the killer's single-mindedness. The youth simply marches up to the first big house he sees, asks to use the telephone, then murders the friendly black maid with a cleaver before racing upstairs, smothering the old lady who owns the place, and cutting her pet dog's throat on the kitchen slab. Easy. The whole sequence is so neatly, concisely and shockingly done you have to laugh, horrible though it all is. Plus, it fires up the transgressive mood of the film even as it demonstrates the ruthless self-interest of the killer.

The film's major flaw is that people give the clearly unstable killer too much credence as a regular guy. But a hooker, Vera really ought to spot her loony admirer's symptoms for what they are, as he fulminates against her sexual activities. The same goes for the maid who allows Matthew to use the phone. Other absurdities include scenes where Vera tries to escape while Matthew is out of the house. In one instance, all too common in films

about messed-up victims, a caller knocks at the door, but, with her just a few feet away, Vera fails to make more than a squeak, as if all it takes to completely silence a captive is a piece of cloth tied over the mouth. There's another irritating moment when Vera dislodges a ringing phone from its wall-mounted hook, then stupidly uses the phone-cradle lever to dislodge her gag, thus ringing the caller off. She calls the operator, using her nose to dial, but can't form the sentences required to ask for help, until she's interrupted by Matthew who hangs up the phone. This last failure is at least explained by hysteria and panic, but the preceding silliness has made us impatient with Vera, when we should be rooting for her.

Depending on your mood, the film can feel either amusingly trashy, or unpleasant and claustrophobic. Despite its intended status as a schlocky exploitation pic, the second half of the film, concerning Matthew's attack on Vera's freedom and identity, is pretty tense and unsettling, like a slasher film taken on John Fowles's *The Collector*. *Scream Bloody Murder* isn't as smart or disturbing as Fowles's book, but it still has power. The killer's gauche trades are simultaneously funny and horrible, as he buys his captive, presents, in order to secure her co-operation: "Look at this – a steak! Well, who else ever brought you a steak before? Nobody, that's who. And paints, and an easel – an easel! How do you like that? There's more damn stuff here than you've ever seen in your life. But do you appreciate it? No, you don't appreciate it. Fine dresses and nice food, the best art stuff they had in the whole store. I'd like to have seen the sailor buy you stuff like this. Well he wouldn't – would he? WOULDN'T HE?" The stalker's lurid scenario culminates in a battle of wits between free-spirited Vera and her repressive captor, and Ray engages our utmost sympathy for the woman. But will our feelings be mauled by one of those bleak endings so typical of the early seventies? Or can the feel-good factor prevail? You'll have to watch and see. In the meantime, let's hope *Scream Bloody Murder* eventually receives a much deserved overhaul on DVD, where I'm sure it will captivate a whole new generation of fans.



Early Days

Marc Benson Ray was born in 1940, in Klamath Falls, Oregon, an army brat whose father was a Captain in the medical corps. His family moved to New York when he was just five, and Ray spent the rest of his childhood and adolescence there. After leaving school he studied method acting under Elia Kazan and Lee Strasberg at New York's famed Actors Studio, from 1956 to the early sixties, but he also studied the opposing tradition of classical theatre. "Between studying and teaching, I probably had the chance to play every major and secondary role that Shakespeare wrote," he recalls. Ray decided to move to the West Coast and continue his career in Hollywood. "I came to California to pursue acting, but I woke up one day – was about twenty-seven, and I wasn't an actor any longer. And I don't really know why for sure, except I know that I don't like actors! I like rehearsing, but there's something about being an actor in California, where it's not a serious thing around with other actors, and they're a totally different breed in California. You could be in a play in California and your leading actor will not show up because he just got a commercial somewhere – and I've directed plays where this has happened. You say to him, we've got an audience sitting here, we've been rehearsing three months, and he says, 'I have a commercial tomorrow morning. I have to get up at six o'clock or I'll get bags under my eyes, so I'm not coming!' No one in New York would do that."

In place of acting, Ray found himself writing for television, everything from variety to comedy to drama to children's shows. One of his earliest writing commissions came when a friend, producer-director David Winters,¹ invited him to write a documentary about motor racing. *Once Upon a Wheel* featured contributions from celebrated racing driver Mario Andretti and movie stars like Paul Newman and Kirk Douglas. Ray then collaborated on a lavish TV Special featuring Ann-Margret. "David Winters was my best friend at the time, we were actors together in New York. He was in the original *West Side Story* and he became a choreographer, much in demand. Ann-Margret's career as a young ingenue/sexpot was basically over, so she mounted a Las Vegas show after about a five years absence from film, to renew her career with a different image as a sexy multi-talented singer/actress. David was called in to choreograph it, and it was a big hit. David and his partner Gert Rosen sold it as a TV Special during the golden era of variety shows. David asked me if I wanted to write it, take a look at the nightclub act and convert it to TV. I said I'd never written anything, but he said he didn't trust Hollywood writers and wanted to work with someone he knew. We put the show on, it was a huge hit. I started doing specials for Bobby Gentry and Noel Harrison and Goldie Hawn, through the sixties and the beginning of the seventies. I did a Tom Jones TV show in Great Britain called *The London Bridge Special* with Jennifer O'Neill, Kirk Douglas and Rudolph Nureyev. Douglas was in Rome at the time doing a movie called *Scatman* (1973), and he was supposed to come to London to do his routines with Tom Jones, but he couldn't get there so we took everybody to Rome."



But, as a life-long movie fan, Ray realised that there was still one ambition he hadn't explored: "I wanted to apply my talents and skills to the cinema," he says. "My ex-wife's father was Ed Goldman, who along with her brother Michael Goldman owned Manson International and also some sister companies, including Taurus Films. At the time they specialised in distributing foreign-made independent movies in America and American independent movies overseas. I made a deal where I'd write and direct a film for them for nothing, for the experience. They asked for a softcore sex film about hot-blooded gypsies, and *vault*."

Wild Gypsies and Scream Bloody Murder

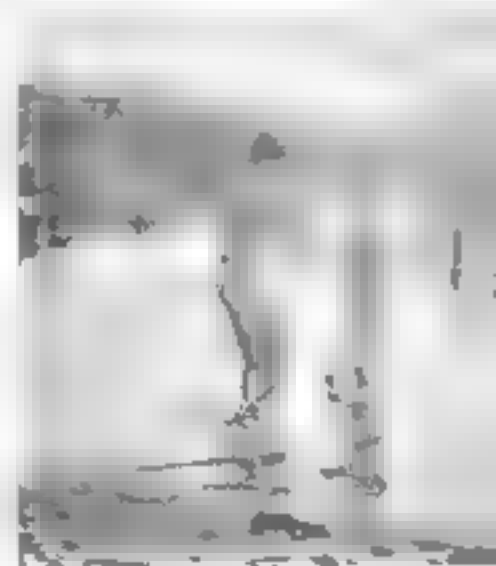
That film was *Wild Gypsies* (1969), which Ray helpfully summarises: "Hot-blooded gypsy guy meets fair-skin girl with big boobs, seduces her, fights with other guys, other hot-blooded gypsies dance around camp fires, get turned on, make out with each other, more fighting, more making out, gypsy music, fighting, breasts, music."

This more or less covers *Wild Gypsies*, which is exuberant in places, but essentially a filler item that would financially pay off as a double bill with something a bit more er. And something meaner was precisely what Ray had in mind for his next movie: "I approached Alan Roberts, who was successful producing and distributing porno films and wanted to go 'legit' with exploitation films. I made the same deal that I made with *Wild Gypsies* – wrote and directed for nothing for the experience." Ray made several suggestions and the film script Roberts liked most was *Scream Bloody Murder*, once Ray had promised Roberts a set number of gory deaths, a budget of nearly \$80,000 was raised. "He made an interesting deal with me," Ray explains. "In my contract he stated that the film 'must be gory' and that I would provide 'one gruesome murder in each reel of a ten reel film' – I outdid myself. We had ten gruesome murders, plus a gruesome killing of a dog. I did not get a bonus for the dog!"

Scenes from Rays



Pages





For the leading role of Matthew, the mother-loving only child with a penchant for murder and kidnapping, Ray needed a young actor who could convey derangement and obsession. He struck lucky with Fred Holbert. "Fred was a messenger with a post-production company who came to an open audition," Ray recalls. "Earnest, hard-working, and sincere. He'd only done community theatre before. He was years older than he looked and brought an innocence and vulnerability to the role, as well as seeming to be off-kilter. He was gay, but didn't have a gay 'affect.' Because he was just playing a younger kind of kid, it looked through as being vulnerable in a sort of Tony Perkins, Keir Dullea sort of way, and I liked him for that reason. He was never heard of again after our film." His co-star Leigh Mitchell, the victim of Matthew's love-obsession, was married to Ron Mitchell, the co-producer. "I don't know what became of her. I know of her acting ability for years before hand. You know, of course that she plays two roles in the film, the hooker and the mother. I did this so that the hooker would remind the killer of his mother." Ray describes this as "a corny device that didn't work," although interestingly it's precisely the approach used by David Cronenberg in his acclaimed adaptation of the Patrick McGrath novel *Spider* (2002). Another key member of the cast may not have seemed so important at the time, but he was to become one of the horror genre's most popular villains. Playing the doctor who sees through Matthew's pretense is 'Rory Guy', aka Angus Scrimm, the 'Taxi Man' of the *Phantasm* films, who probably enjoys more dialogue in this one scene than in the four Coscarelli movies combined! Ray recalls "a quiet, reserved and mysterious man. Kept to himself. Seemed to be quite smart. He was this ominous presence with this resonant voice, and when he spoke it seemed... very important."

Conventional Hollywood wisdom says you can't build a film around an unsympathetic character. I don't agree, but having found that the coldness and spitefulness of Matthew's attitude prevented me from feeling much sympathy for him.

I asked Ray his opinion on the subject: "I don't think there's a hard and fast rule about building a film around a sympathetic or not sympathetic character. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't. You can illustrate either point with successful films based on one or the other side of the coin. Personally, I felt sympathy for Matthew because he was a victim of his obsessions and delusions and his warped childhood. It doesn't excuse his pathological behaviour, of course, but it does make him a more interesting and conflicted character, driven by inner demons and real psychosis rather than sheer evil. Matthew is sociopathic. He has no sense of other people's feelings, only his own wants and needs. He needs a car, he gets one. He needs a girl, he kidnaps one. He needs a house, he commandeers one. I just connected the dots. What did Matthew need next? What did he get it without a moment's concern for anybody else's wants, needs, feelings or life?"

The combination of bloody violence, added to the very bleak and downbeat mood, was common in seventies horror but is much less popular today. I asked Ray what could have influenced this nihilistic strain in his writing, where even the family dog gets butchered: "I was and am in fine spirits and take each day with humour and a grain of salt. My money-man wanted gore, and Technicolor blood was one of our biggest expenses. It was in the contract! There had to be one murder in every reel, so basically we were pacing them ten minutes apart. 'Gore-nographic', as the original one-sheet said. As soon as I saw the film put

together, I wished I had used much less blood. It would have been more frightening and more real, sure. The excessive blood made the film too over-the-top and kept you from entirely suspending your disbelief. I wanted Matthew to kill the dog so (a) he could, in his mind, create a peaceful and trouble-free world for him and the hooker, (b) so we could shock the audience, and (c) to live up to my contractual obligation to provide lots of gore. By the way, the immobile dog with the cleaver in its neck never blinks its eyes because during the zoom in, I did a freeze frame on his opened eyes which made him look dead.

At which point, we British viewers of the film do a double-take: there is no such cleaver-in-the-dog's-neck shot in the British pre-certification release on the 21st Century Video label. Despite his qualms about excessive gore, Ray laughs when I tell him this: "Too bad about those edits. A few of those closing shots are as gory as hell. Lots of blood. Hollywood filmmakers are always told to make it sexier for some countries, tone it down for others, more blood and guts for these countries, less violence for those. I guess some distributor didn't think you Brits have the stomach for some of the mayhem that went on so they cut it down for you. Toughen up Americans – take all the sex and blood they can get, and then some!"

The film defies its low budget by hopping energetically through several different locations. Ray recalls that the film was shot "all over L.A. wherever we could steal scenes without a permit, without insurance, and without getting caught. Once Matthew kills his folks, it's basically a road movie: he hits the road and makes murderous stops along the way, with no real destination in mind. The mansion he commandeers is now owned and occupied by Muhammad Ali, and was used in the last *Rocky* film as Rocky's residence. It was owned by a minister, a very old man, who had a Christian radio show. His pool was fouled up and one of the guys in the crew was willing to go into the pool and remove the pump or filter and fix it for him. And he said, if you can fix it you can use my house for three days. So we fixed his pool pump and we got to use it."

As always with low-budget production, the film demanded 100% effort from the cast and crew: "We worked for ten days, eighteen hours a day, no days off, in order to maximize use of the rental equipment and keep the budget way, way down. Because I didn't attend film school or have any on-set experience other than as a writer or actor, I was compelled to concentrate on my weakness, the technical side, rather than the acting and character development, which was my strength. I was also solely responsible for getting the film done on-time and on-budget, so every minute detail down to gasoline for the trucks and coffee and doughnuts became my focus. I wish I could have concentrated on the actors and visual work and had someone else worry about the nuts and bolts, but, *c'est la vie*."

The hand-held camerawork, wide lenses, and tilted Dutch angles used for the violent scenes were the work of Stephen Burum, a brilliant cinematographer who was just starting out at the time. He went on to shoot *The Outsiders* and *Rumblefish* for Francis Ford Coppola, before becoming a regular collaborator with Brian De Palma, shooting *Bushy Double*, *The Untouchables*, *Mission Impossible* and others. Ray knew he'd struck lucky with his DP: "Steve Burum is a born genius as a cinematographer. He started filming when he was just a little kid, always knew he wanted to be a cinematographer. He taught at UCLA, and is among the very best there is. He was the cinematographer on some TV

specials I wrote for Ann-Margret, Bob Hope, Raquel Welch, etc. We became friends and admirers of each others' work. He did the film as a favour to our friendship. He's truly gifted. His talent makes me and the film look much better than either of us deserve."

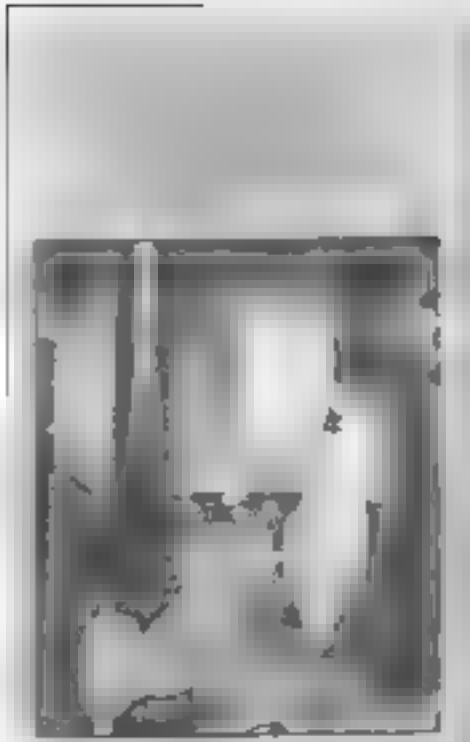
When it came to the editing, low-budget restrictions were very much to the fore: "My choices were limited to cut-and-paste. I was allowed very little time in editing due to cost constraints (rented room, rented Moviola), so most of what we did was splice. When you shoot so fast, you have very little coverage and very few retakes, so you're basically using the few shots you were able to get and don't have much room for editorial experimentation or creativity. I am proud of the editing in the kitchen scene where Matthew kills the black maid. It was filmed in two takes: Matthew pursues the camera, hacking at it. The camera pursues the maid who behaves like she's being hacked at.

Release and Reflection

Distribution was handled by producer Alan Roberts. Ray remembers: "The film played in many small towns and cities and lots of overseas venues. It's impossible to get a small film with no names into a major city or chain theatre. I didn't attend any early screenings but I saw the film much later in a theatre in Washington, D.C., (they had two reels out of sequence) and opening night during a wind storm in a drive-in theatre in either North or South Carolina. A few hours after the theatre closed, the wind blew the screen down and the rest of the run was cancelled. By the way, the film was a big hit in Guam. I have no idea how successful the film was financially. We all worked for percentage points and none of us saw a dime. Distributors, though, always make money. They pass on what's left to the producers who deduct production costs and expenses. Add a little creative book-keeping and there's nothing left. It's common practice in the movie biz. If you want to hire a Certified Public Accountant and auditor and invest a lot of bucks to dig around, you might come up with a few dollars, but probably not. On little films, a distributor sells rights to a package of films, so you never have any idea how much of the package is your film. It happens every day. Even to movie stars and major directors. There are auditing firms working 365 days a year in Hollywood doing nothing but looking for clients."

Scream Bloody Murder was also released as *The Captive Female* and *Claw of Terror*, a choice made by the distributors, says Ray, "to maximize income potential and to re-release the same film under different titles at a later date." Of course, such capricious retitling is yet another factor which keeps the filmmaker in the dark about the true extent of his movie's profits: "Because it was produced by the distributors, they played the hell out of it, at home and overseas."

Mark Ray's shocking and enthralling horror film may be overdue for a revival, but he's far from concerned of that himself, admitting: "I'm afraid I didn't and don't attend horror films. I shouldn't have made this one, but it was a chance to get some much-needed filmmaking experience. I'm sure that someone who loves the genre would have done a much, much better job than I did. The same goes for *Wito Goyones*. I'm 30 years older than I was when I made the film. The world has changed, I've changed. Nobody would give me a movie to direct and I wanted to learn and get one or two on my resumé. First time around, they wanted a movie. I could have said no, I didn't – I made a nudie



The 21st Century VCL, UK, video cover for *Scream Bloody Murder*

COVER ART
Cover art from the extremely rare and
valuable

second time around, they wanted blood and gore. Nobody forced me. I made blood and gore. I was hoping to make *Forrest Gump* one day. It would be best if the director was passionate about the kind of film he was making. I knew and know nothing about horror films. I'm a perfectionist and although the film was shot very, very fast on a tiny budget

its huge imperfections, I think of the film as a cheap little exploitation film that doesn't elevate the human condition in any way. There is no moral or ethical lesson to be learned from it. Its intent is to entertain by slaughter. It's just not who I am. I appreciate that you see merit in the film. I really do. But the way I'm wired, I can only see how much better it could have and should have been. Given the money and time constraints, it could have been a five or a six. I missed by a mile.

Referring to the friends and colleagues who made *Scream Blood: Murder* with him, Ray reflects: "We were a fairly relaxed, counter-cultural group. It was, after all, Southern California during the height of the hippy, free-love, smoke pot, peace-and-love era. I was and am a liberal, civil rights advocate, ex-freedom rider, pacifist. I had the privilege of having my two front teeth broken in a jail in Montgomery, Alabama when I was punched in the face with my hands cuffed behind me. And sitting on the floor we were all made to sit side by side with our hands cuffed behind our backs and this cop or Mounie came along and took out his dick and urinated on all of us, so that was a wonderful experience. Then when I was here in California there were a lot of anti-war demonstrations. When the last riots broke out here my [redacted] called me up, she lived in Brooklyn, and she said, 'I know you're gonna get involved, but please don't.' I ended up going to hospital and rolling bandages, and driving people to hospital who had been beaten and dumped on the sidewalk."

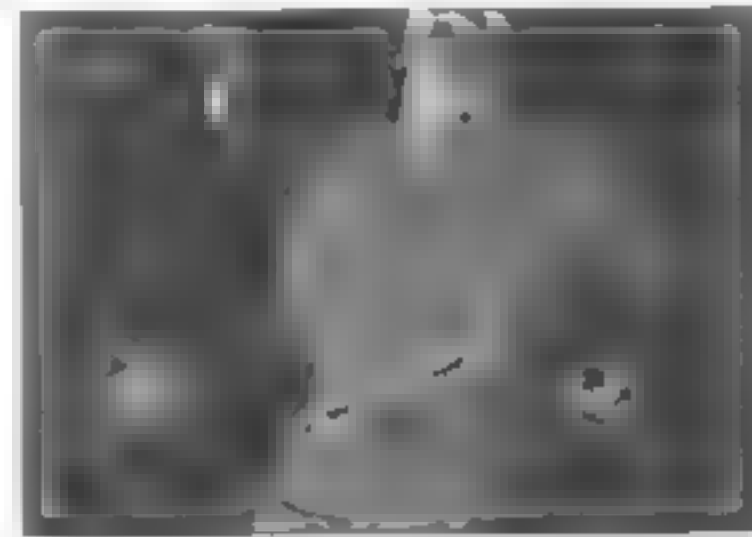
Back to the Mainstream

After *Scream Blood: Murder*, Ray continued writing for film and television. For horror fans, the most notable of these credits is *The Severed Arm*, directed in 1972 by Thomas Adelman and produced by Gary Adelman (see review section). Ray explains how the script came about: "My father was an Army physician in World War II. He had told me about some sailors who were stranded for days in a raft and drew lots to consume one another's body parts in order to survive. Soon after severing one guy's arm and eating it they were rescued. The guy without the arm always resented the other sailors, and they always lived in guilt. I thought it was a great basis for a story. Years later, on location for *Scream Blood: Murder*, a passer-by approached me and introduced himself. He said he was Gary Adelman and wanted to be a movie producer. He was looking for an idea for a horror movie. My mind was on watching them set up the next shot (Matthew meeting the hooker as she was painting in Venice), and I off-handedly told him my idea for the severed arm story. He took my phone number and called me a day or two later. He bought the story from me (I think for one hundred dollars), and the rest, as they say, is history."

After writing another lavish TV special, this time featuring Burt Bacharach and pop singers The Fifth Dimension ("Up, Up and Away") grooving in Shangri-La, Ray's next major credit took him to the very heart of American culture. Strange though it may seem, the man behind *Scream Blood: Murder* became the only director interviewed for this book to have had his own park space at the Disney Studios, when in 1976 he was entrusted with



stewardship of *The New Mickey Mouse Club*, the Disney Corporation's relaunched children's variety show. The original ran from 1955-59 and then in syndicated re-runs through the sixties and seventies. By the mid-seventies though, the series was looking distinctly old-fashioned, and the Disney top brass decided that a new version was required. Ray explains the thinking: "In the mid-70s, Disney studios decided to recreate the *Mickey Mouse Club* TV series. Times had changed significantly since the original cutesy-poo version. The new version would be shot on multi-camera videotape, which Disney had never done before (only single camera film), and they wanted a contemporary feel to the show. My agent submitted me as head writer because I had a lot of experience in videotaped variety TV, and I was into the pop and rock music scene. They took a long, hard look at me, swallowed hard, and hired me to be the contemporary pulse of the show. In addition to my writing chores, Peter Martin and I wrote the theme songs for the daily shows, and I introduced them to 'Walkin' the Dog', 'Joy to the World' and some other rock classics. It was fun. I had a lot of independence, since they were brand new to this world. The old guard at Disney regarded me with some suspicion, especially in the executive dining room which I was privy to. They wore white shirts and ties, I had long hair, a beard and blue jeans. They also approached videotaping in the same manner as film, which I happily educated them in. [redacted] as a distinct hierarchy at Disney. [redacted] your office was in, how nice your office was, where you parked, ate, who your visitors were, etc. But since I had such a pivotal role in the production, I leapfrogged past some of the old-guard, which they weren't then thrilled about. [redacted] layer said that, I want to emphasize that some of the most creative, intelligent, talented, sane and wholesome people I have ever worked with were employed at Disney studios. It was a pleasure to watch them work and to know them."



They took away everything he
loved and cared for — and now he's

The ORPHAN



**“The Orphan” is a gripping
psychological thriller —
don't watch it alone!**

Written and Directed by JOHN BALLARD

Starring PEGGY FULRY • JOANNA MILES • DONN WHYTE
and Mark Owens as David with STANLEY CHURCH •
ELEANOR STEWART • AFOLABI AJAYI • JANE HOUSE •
ED FOREMAN • JIM BRODER

Art Director Production Supervisor SIDNEY ANN MACKENZIE
Production Supervisor PETER MULLER Theme song by JANIS IAN

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Growing Pains

an Essay on the making of Friday the 13th: The Orphan

with contributions from Sidney Ann Mackenzey

Friday the 13th: The Orphan (1977)

The 1930s. When wealthy explorer Kevin De Ropp (Donn Whyte) and his wife Fern (Joanna Miles) are killed in a domestic shooting accident, their ten-year-old son David (Mark Owens) is left in the care of his Aunt Martha (Peggy Feury), who moves into the De Ropp family home, a large estate set in rambling grounds. David, an imaginative and sensitive boy who idolised his father, finds life without him difficult, and his relationship with stern, repressive Aunt Martha soon deteriorates. Martha, who means well but has no empathy for children, makes the mistake of criticising David's father; her subsequent attempts to guide and discipline David fall on any ground, and he begins to despise her. For a while, he becomes close to Akin (Aloinb Ajayi), an African friend of his father's who lives on the estate and enjoys friendly banter with Dr. Thompson (Stanley Church), another of his father's old friends who visits occasionally. He also forms a close connection with Mary (Fleanor Stewart), a servant woman. However, Aunt Martha grows resentful of these bonds, and when she sees Akin sharing a pipe with David in an African smoking ceremony, she orders Akin to leave the estate, demanding also that he should dispose of a live chicken David keeps in an old coop at the bottom of the garden. The coop is the boy's private den, almost hidden in the trees at the edge of the grounds where Aunt Martha rarely strays. Although forbidden to say goodbye to David, Akin sends him a note explaining that Martha demanded the chicken be killed. Consumed with rage at his Aunt, David spends more time down at the coop, collecting objects of talismanic significance and constructing his own belief system, drawing on African mysticism gleaned from his father and Akin, married by his own fevered imaginations. Central to his private iconography is 'Charlie', a stuffed chimpanzee, who occupies centre-stage on a raised dais. When Aunt Martha accidentally kills David's pet dog by slamming a door on it, he becomes fixated on prayers and rituals to destroy her. His friendship with Mary ends after he overhears her saying she doesn't care about him. When Mary is hanging sheets in the laundry room an unseen assailant attacks her, slubbing her to death. David runs in his pyjamas across snow-covered countryside to the Ford house, claiming to have heard Mary being murdered by Aunt Martha, but the

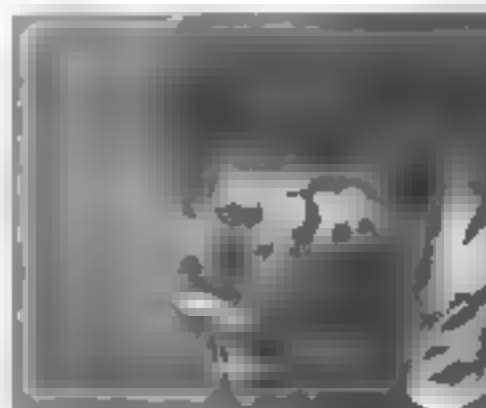
Fords simply return him back home. Martha tells David she's decided to send him away to boarding school. Falling asleep, he has a nightmare in which he's admitted to an orphanage with filthy interiors, broken furniture, and rusting beds upon which disturbed children are tied up. Dr. Thompson and his Aunt, the latter disguised as a man, take him to a filthy operating theatre and cut out his tongue. On waking, David sees his Aunt go down to the coop. Enraged at the thought that she might destroy 'Charlie', he follows her.

Literary in both source and style, *The Orphan* is a secret garden in American horror, barely acknowledged in fan writing so far but worthy of much closer inspection if you appreciate subtle psychological chills. Director John Hallard's resolute emphasis on character and relative disinterest in physical violence, may have contributed to the film's initial lack of success on its release, but I urge you to see this highly moving and disturbing work. I am reminded of *Sredni Tashlar*, a marvelously mordant short story by the British writer Saki (aka H. H. Munro) – whose tales, though rarely drawn upon, provide excellent material for film adaptation (Claudio Guerin H. H.'s *La campana del infierno* (1973) used Saki's story *The Open Window* to great effect for one sequence). It's also worth checking out *The Orphan* if you enjoyed Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), and I was reminded of it too when I saw Neil Jordan's brilliant film *The Butcher Boy* (1997), but there are few precursors, perhaps *The Orphan*'s only cinematic parents are Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961).

Vital to the film's success is young Mark Owens, who makes David a credible and sympathetic figure. His expressions of near-adolescent rage at 'The Woman' (as he twice refers to Aunt Martha) have the primal energy of hatred that only a child, powerless to act in an unjust world, can summon. As is often the case when the powerless have nowhere to turn, religion becomes the outlet, and Owens is particularly outstanding in the scenes where he assembles his religious iconography and prays, sometimes in the clasp-handed style of Christian worship and other times in emulation of African tribal trance-states. His sleepy, slightly deer-like features suddenly animate into blazes of emotion. It's a pity he didn't go on to act in other films, because in *The Orphan* he shows the promise of a young Wil Wheaton: he could certainly have held his own in a movie like *Stand By Me*.

This JK video release from Video Video, who's also released George Romero's *The Crazies* and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Days of American Crime*, wisely dispensed with the *Friday the 13th* tag (on the cover at least) and marketed the film as *The Orphan*, although the sleeve's promise of a 100-minute version was a little misleading – the Video version actually weighs in at just under 75 minutes.

Mark Owens ES:JS+C



Then there's Peggy Feury, a skilled and thoughtful actress who demonstrates here how she came to be one of the guiding lights in her profession. (She taught acting at the Actors Studio, alongside Lee Strasberg.) The role of Aunt Martha is already well-written, but Feury brings her own amazingly subtle shadings to the part. It would have been easy for Martha to become simply an ogre or mad-woman. But despite the film giving emotional bias to the boy's point of view, Feury's performance shows us a complex and troubled woman who sometimes tries – and then fails – to do the right thing. Of course there's much to criticize about her – like many of the adults in the film she's appallingly racist, screeching “Don't you touch me you black nigger man” when Akin tries to protect David and then informing him in more reasonable tones later that she doesn't want David associating with anything “dirty”. She's referring more to the smoking ritual she saw the two of them practising, but the careless ambiguity of her words speaks volumes for the way racist whites felt towards blacks in the thirties. Feury's watchful, hooded grey-blue eyes have a potential for cruelty and scorn, but she softens this by adding a sort of defeated weariness (this is a woman whose life has gone sour years ago, and the presence of her sister's child in her life merely underlines her lack of love and intimacy). There's a suggestion that she once had a relationship with Kevin, David's father, until he dropped her and married her sister instead, but since we only see this as a sort of midnight reverie on Martha's part, it's unclear whether it's true or just a fantasy. Later, in a sexually loaded context, Mary says to her, “You knew Kevin as well as I did,” but this statement hinges on a double ambiguity – we're also unsure whether Mary might actually be David's true biological mother. And in one of the film's saddest scenes, we see Martha trying to reproduce the intimacy she saw Mary enjoying with David earlier, during a game of ‘statues’ by compelling the boy to dance an awkward waltz with her around the sitting room.

At the heart of this story is a boy who feels a powerful need for the love and companionship of a father. When his father dies, Martha tries to control him by denying him the companionship of others. In a trait that leads to her downfall, Martha resents David's love for his father, and tries to corrupt it. The boy has a persistent asthmatic cough, and Martha makes a point of claiming he inherited this weakness from his dad. As with David's friendship with Akin, his love for his pet chicken, and his contents of his shed, Martha is motivated by resentment of anything that might mean independence of mind for the boy, and at the film's emotional core is the repudiation of that oppression.

Perhaps the film's only real mis-step is that David's fantasy image of his father is conveyed in such a sentimentalised way. In fact at first I was tempted to read it as parody. On a snowy mountainside, David runs to his father and the two embrace, while swirling round in slow-motion to the strains of a rather slushy orchestration. David's father is handsome in a Kay & Catalogue sort of way, and his slightly bunco Marlboro-Lite features further enhance the feeling of parody. Once you accept that the feelings are genuine, though, it's worth making an allowance for this sentimental miscalculation: the psychological dimension of the story proves to be far more subtle and accomplished than this early scene suggests. What's more, one must be careful not to bring adult

cynicism into play when dealing with a child's perceptions. The music and the slow motion may be oversentimentalised, but the snowy mountainside setting fits a boy's vision of his father as a hero. It's like a fantasy drawn from the novels of Jack London. And declarations of love between parents and children, though sometimes too casually slipped into American speech, do have real emotional currency. In short, if you rescore the scene with ambient wind sounds and the crunching of snow underneath, the whole thing would work just fine.

The Orphan was begun in 1968, a very loaded year for inter-generational relations. Ballard, out of step with the zeitgeist, chose to tell a story which actually values the father as a symbol & figure, running counter to the revolutionary fervour of the Youth Movement which was directed towards iconoclasm and the rejection of patriarchal authority. Jim Morrison was killing his father and fucking his mother in his song ‘The End’ (1967) but Ballard looked back, not chafed with a different eye. In Freud, the son sees the father as a rival for the mother's affections, and begins the process of socialisation only when he repudiates his desire for the mother and accepts the Oedipal father's authority (leading to a mixture of hate/adoration of the father that propels so many Oedipal narratives). Although *The Orphan* fails to explore David's feelings for his dead mother (an oversight in the film that one could perhaps construe as significant in Freudian terms), his feelings for his father lack the conventional love/hate dynamic, because David's father is far from a traditional authority figure. He's more anarchist than lawgiver. He's the archetype of the daring explorer, absent for long stretches but generously affectionate to his son when he returns, and full of inspiring stories about the wonders of the wider world. He thus represents freedom from domestic structures, where women are traditionally in control. The father's oblique relationship to conventional patriarchy puts him in cahoots with his son, not against him. The fact that he is often absent from the family home means that he appears ‘irresponsible’ to other adults, a point made by one of the Fords. “If Kevin had stayed at home with his son where he belonged, instead of huckussing around Africa, he would never have died”. Being a father means being there at all times. Dr. Thompson, Kevin's friend, replies “Oh hell, Kevin was away from David for years, but I'd be willing to bet that David has a better sense of his father as a man than most boys have.” And it's borne out by other scenes which reinforce Thompson's argument: the father retains the love of his son because his adventurer's life in Africa inspires the boy. “Oh David, you'd love it there. All the animals run free,” he says. It's when this powerful ally and compatriot is (accidentally) killed by the mother, who then kills herself, that David enters a darker psychological realm, and when he is forced to live with the puritanical, overbearing Martha, and suffers a variety of emotional losses (his hen, his dog, and his relationships with Akin and Mary), we see what may be the birth of a future psychotic. (The film retains some ambiguity about this – see interview.)

One face of Western patriarchy that Ballard summarily dismisses in *The Orphan* is Christianity. We see David placing ‘Charles’ on a makeshift altar and kneeling before it, with his hands pressed together in prayer. Ballard then cuts to a shot of David kneeling in church as a line of Catholic worshippers take the



Vincent Carby said: "I think it's clear that the director's first film isn't autobiographical," and I had to laugh, because in a really subtextual way it is."

John Ballard

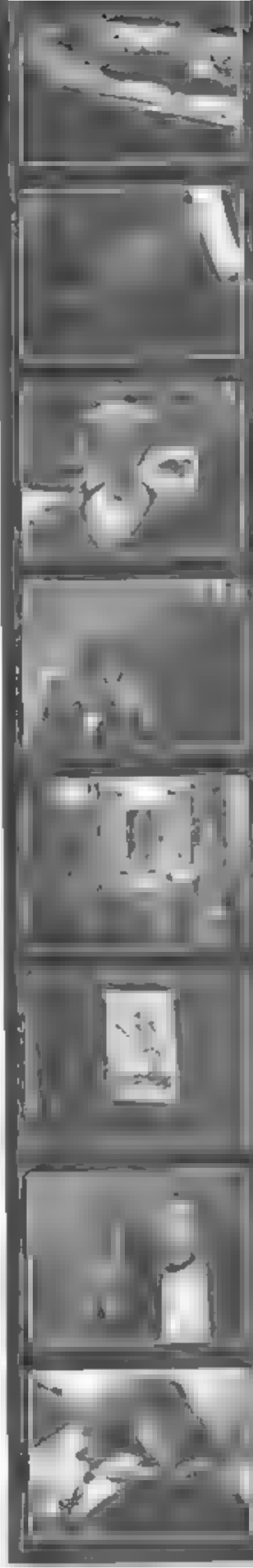
The Orphan is one of the most literate, intelligent and unusual films covered in this book. Its journey to the screen was long and troubled, and the fact that it did eventually see a release is a testament to the tenacity of its director, John Ballard. I was fortunate enough to meet Ballard when he came to Essex and with his wife, the renowned jazz singer Jackie Ryan, for her concert at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in Soho, London, in October of 2003. He's a tall, rangy man, soft-spoken and thoughtful, and he gave very generously not only of his time but also of his personal memories. The story of *The Orphan* is drawn partly from a literary source, but Ballard adapted his screenplay by drawing creatively on aspects of his own childhood experience. Where some genre filmmakers are happiest working, at least at the conscious level, with material outside of their own lives (Bill Rebane's *The Giant Spider Invasion* for instance is not a film you would scrutinise for psychological undercurrents), *The Orphan* is a truly individual piece of work that has to be considered in a different aesthetic framework. It explores aspects of what Freud called "the family romance", bringing insight and empathy to the story of a young boy's slide into madness.

The film has only ever been available on video as *Friday the 13th: The Orphan*, with a copyright date of 1977. In fact, *The Orphan*, or *Betraven* as it was first called, actually began shooting in 1968. The film's release came after many years during which the director struggled to complete a final cut, and in order to secure that release Ballard had to accept some last-minute changes inflicted on the film by the later-day producers. Keen, after ten years of effort, to at least have some version of the film released, Ballard agreed to these changes, and the film had its brief time in the sun. Since then, however, it has been neglected by horror fans, something I hope this chapter will change. *The Orphan* may not have the shock value of some of the other great films covered in *Unsettling U.S.* but it's stylish and well-acted, and it explores a troubled child's experiences in an honest, unexplosive way.

Beginnings

John Ballard was born in Manhattan in 1947. A child prodigy and accomplished oil-painter by the age of seven, his talent was soon recognised by his parents, who sent him to art school in Vance, Canada. His talents were many and varied: he drew cartoons and painted, as well as writing plays and short stories. His parents initially harboured business hopes for their son, but once they saw how advanced he was as an artist, they wound up supporting his creative ambitions.

Ballard left school and went to Harvard, where he became good friends with Peter Muller, soon-to-be co-producer of *The Orphan*. "In those days there were no film programs in college, so we started a film club," he recalls.



Communion wafer in their mouths. When it's his turn David refuses the sacrament and throws the wafer on the floor. "He is not my father," he explains. David's choice of chimp as his Godhead is also significant, both because of his rejection of nature-worship (paganism) and for a particular antipathy Christians have for Darwin (whose theory of Natural Selection is often condensed to the image of a chimpanzee). The relationship between John and David also brings in non-Christian associations, especially in the scene in which Martha finds the two smoking together. David has a readily absorbed African fluency from the tales his father told to him, and his worship of his new god involves dancing to African music. Christianity did its utmost to stamp out religious practices built around intoxicating drugs or dancing to trance-inducing music (although the latter struck back in via the Pentecostalists), and it's obvious that for Martha, intoxication (and by inference hedonism, sexual pleasure) is associated with sinfulness and leprosy. When she finds David and Akin sitting together, both dressed in African robes and exchanging the pipe, we see the ritual through her suspicious eyes. When she discovers that Sakis is a pagan, she takes the mouthpiece, the wiping of the nozzle with the thumb, the slow, measured exchange of the pipe between two males. The exclusion of women is something that many African tribes practise, and twice Akin tells David to remember that he is his father's child. This advice, and similar remarks from Dr. Thompson, suggest the way in which traditional male identity is predicated on the exclusion of the feminine.

This cult of masculinity is complemented by the story's concurrent depiction of women as variously excessive, neurotic, untrustworthy or soul-denying, and the most questionable of the film's choices. David's mother is given almost no screen attention at all. David never even mentions her death, even though it's implied that he saw the accident in which she shot her husband and then herself. Mary, on the other hand, is both sister and wife. She looks out for his interests, she protects the older sibling, and she says to David she knows he can never be his mother, but hopes that he will come to think of her as such. David then places a ring on her finger and says "Til death do us part." Thus are all the feminine qualities incorporated into Mary who is the sole repository of feminine value, and for most of the film she is a good balance for the paternal weight of the narrative. (In constructing Mary like this, Ballard softens Sakis's tale, which refers to the unnamed servant only as "my-faced".)

As Ballard reveals later in this chapter, *The Orphan* went through a pruning process at the hands of its female producers before its eventual screen debut in 1978 (ironic considering the story): several subtitles were lost, a shorter running time was imposed, and the overall structure was distorted. Watching *The Orphan*, one can sense that there were difficulties in the production, but after a rather bumpy first ten minutes even this shorter version (which is, after all, the only one we have) stands up as a genuinely thoughtful exploration of child psychology. If Ballard loses Sakis's sly humour and his maliciousness (*Sredni Vashtar* is as funny as it is horrible), he brings to the tale a compassion and seriousness that repay our close attention.

While studying at Harvard, Ballard found himself drawn in another direction: "I was deeply interested in aberrant psychology. At Harvard they called it 'Nuts and Sits' that's what I majored in" - was especially interested in autism, and also child abuse. In 1963/64 people weren't "into" child psychology at all. My thesis at Harvard was about role models and identity. I studied with Erik Erikson, who was a disciple of Freud's.

After leaving Harvard, Ballard went to NYU (New York University) Graduate School for Film and Television. NYU, along with UCLA in California, was one of the few places in the country at the time to offer such a course. "It purported to offer a year studying film in New York, a year at a Hollywood studio, and then a third year in Europe as apprentice to a European filmmaker," Ballard recalls. "None of that came about. They got the *creme de la creme* to go to that school but they had no funding and no equipment. So we went off and made our own films. In his class were Jeremy Paul Kagan (future director of *The Chosen*); Ron Maxwell (*Gods and Generals*); Jeff Young (*Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*); and Paul Caponigro, one of the country's top black and white photographers and a disciple of Ansel Adams. Adams himself occasionally lectured at NYU, and Ballard recalls: "The school was so badly equipped that his lectures on the use of the light meter were done entirely by drawing on a blackboard, because we didn't have any light meters. Most of us quit school and joined the school of hard knocks and made our own films after a year. I had a little Bolex and I shot a lot of surrealistic sort of - what Ballardish fantasy things.

The first of these was a thirty-minute movie called *The Tot*. Ballard explains, "At the time I was doing one of my films, and so that worked well for the film. They're both in it. And I met two teenage boys and they're in the film too. So even at the time the films were made and the surrealistic nature of the subject-matter were hallucinogens a research tool for Ballard." Drives were commented with, but at the same time I did not admire or respect Timothy Leary one iota. Whereas Bob Dylan Ballard's respect for Dylan inspired him to act as

photographer and assistant director on Jeff Young's short film, *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* (the title comes from a Dylan song of the same name based on a real-life murder case, in which a rich young white man beat to death a black barwoman but received a mere six-month sentence). He also shot a documentary on the celebrated writer Jorge Luis Borges. "He was lecturing in New York so I filmed the lecture and then interviewed him. I took kind of a straight-ahead, very cerebral approach." He laughs. "And then I just jumped into making a feature. I didn't know you weren't supposed to do that at twenty-one."

Pre-Production

Ballard's interest in psychology naturally found succour in his cinema-going. It was the mid-1960s, and the European film was a major force. Ballard loved Ingmar Bergman's movies for their intense psychological explorations ("In *The Orphan*, when the boy is trying to get some emotional strength by building this altar to his father and keep that memory alive, there's a point where there are two mirrors, and the father and son's images merge together - was drawing on Bergman's *Persona* he admits). The early films of John Cassavetes (particularly *Shadows* and *Faces*) provided an American

equivalent. Roman Polanski also registered strongly on Ballard's creative radar, with *Repulsion* in particular striking a deep chord.

In 1967 John Ballard met Stanley Ann Mackenzie, who became his partner and collaborator for the next eight years until the couple broke up, amicably, in 1975. Mackenzie is credited as producer, and fulfilled many other roles. She was Ballard's friend, creative lieutenant, and lover. "Everything didn't do, she did!" he laughs. "All you need is two people on camera and sound, and lights, and away you go.

Together, they began setting up production on *The Orphan* which began life as a script called *Killers of the Dream* (a title borrowed from a Lillian Smith novel) built on the foundation of a short story by Saki, aka H.H. Munro, called *Freedom vs. Fear* (of which more later). Says Ballard, "I was looking for a story and it just resonated with me. I started to build on it, using the emotional underpinnings.

Ballard received a strong initial boost from his who invested in the project, Sidney Mackenzie recalls.

Money came from friends and family. John's dad put some money in at the start. Independent investors came in later - at one point there were two very suspicious characters from New Jersey who said they had a laundry business. "I didn't know what it meant at the time. I thought it was very odd that they didn't want to see the script and they didn't want to see any of the footage. We were a little on the naive side.

Casting was obviously key to such a character-led film and for the central role Ballard found a talented young unknown called Mark Owens. "I went to a professional children's acting school. Most of the kids I saw were kind of spoiled, you know, Pepsodent-smile types. Most child actors in those days were doing toothpaste commercials. It came down to two. Clark Collins, the son of Judy Collins, the folk singer - he had red hair and green eyes, and I was attracted to that as I had red hair, so it fitted the role. But then I noticed this one shy kid in the cafeteria, Mark Owens, and just immediately screen-tested him. He was a bit aloof, very inward-looking, and hadn't done a whole lot of commercials, and when I worked with the two doing tests I realised he was the one, with the right sort of interior life.

As the makers of the Harry Potter films realised, there are problems working with young actors, they mature at lightning speed, so that scenes shot a year apart reveal the swift growth of the actor, making it difficult to match shots. "Fortunately Mark had a nice supply of kid brothers," laughs Ballard. "Two younger kid brothers for the voice - you know your voice changes at thirteen. Mark was ten when the film began shooting. When we finished he was about seventeen. For the birthday party, in the still shots at beginning, we had to use a different boy who looked exactly like him.

For the role of Akon, Ballard cast Nigerian actor Afolabi Ajayi. "We had the first African in a lead role, Afolabi Ajayi. We filmed a whole lot and then he died, and we had to stop. We wound up using doubles for a lot of scenes." (Ajayi, a footballer, collapsed and died while playing in Central Park.

Behind the camera, Ballard began with Robert Kaylor and for a while Bob Butler. Eventually, as the fragmented shooting schedule made it difficult to hold a team together, Ballard was joined by the talented Czech emigre Beda Bakka, who shot the majority of the film. Bakka brought an inventiveness and openness to new ideas that reflected his experience making critically-lauded films in his homeland. Ballard recalls him coming up with unusual solutions to technical limitations. "Beda Bakka was quite capable of doing the fluid camera we wanted. He was from

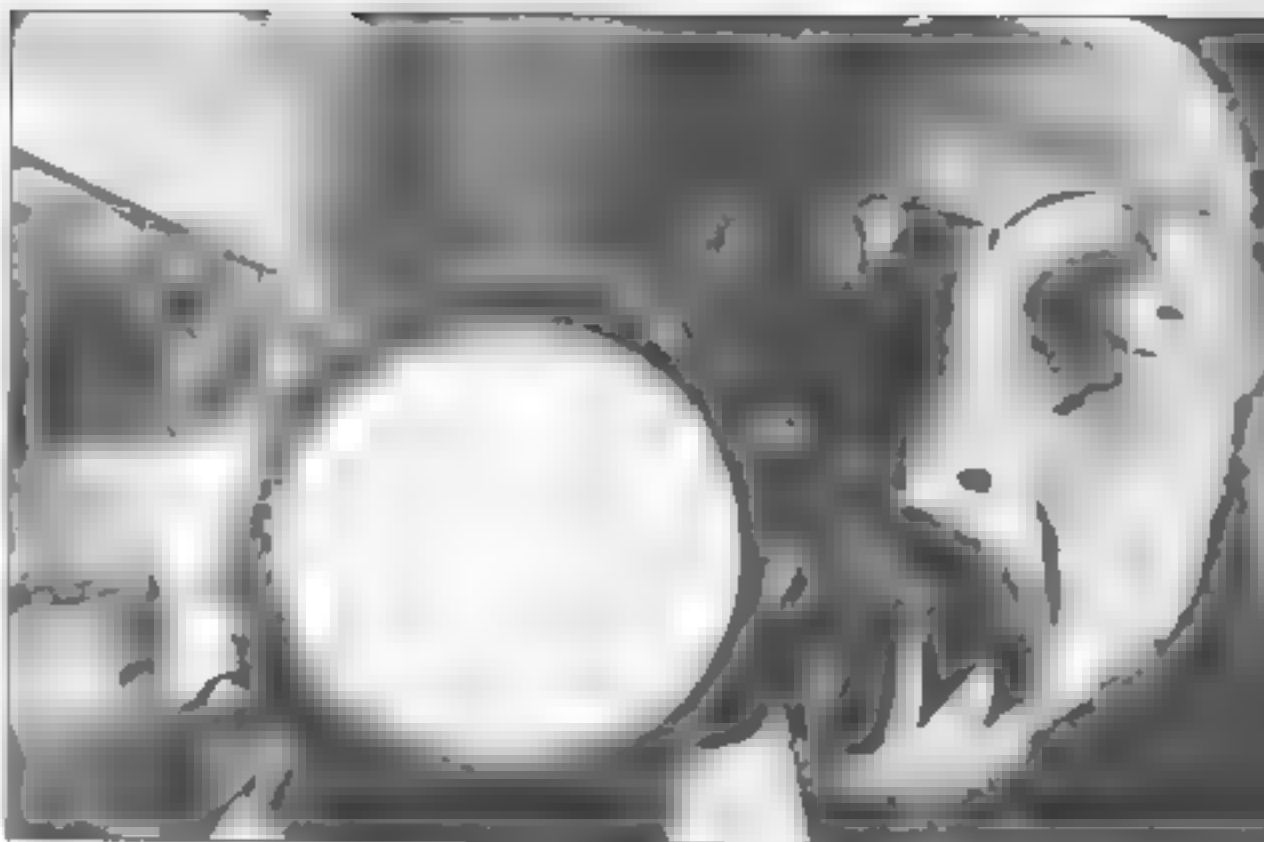
Czechoslovakia, he trained Milos Forman, he trained Jan Kaurar, he did twenty-six feature films there. Then he came over here and he couldn't get a job as a DP. They wanted him to start as a focus puller. He was a teacher at NYU and he moonlighted to do this job, but unfortunately he had these union problems and it was hard to get work. We had an Arriflex, blimped so we could do the sound scenes, but we were doing a lot of hand-held stuff as well. For the low angles under the bed, we had a little metal pipe on the floor and we rolled the camera back and forth and swiveled it around on the pipe to get that five inches from the carpet feet, which gave us flexibility of movement without jerking. We only had tracks for a few early scenes, in the town at the beginning, the meeting at the teahouse etc.

Sidney Mackenzie recalls, "Most of the horror drags, the really raunchy ones, were filmed over a weekend because New York at that point was mostly used for commercials. The commercials people would return all the rental equipment to F & B Ceco, which was the main place where everybody rented from, and then the horror film people and the independent people like us would come in on Friday and rent over the weekend because it was cheaper. There were people shooting just unthinkable things out in warehouses in Queens over the weekends that way." (There was one Latino guy who raised Chihuahuas who rented his equipment from F & B Ceco's, then he would go out to this warehouse in Queens and film things about naked women being impaled on gigantic phalluses on the wall – and then he would take them down because it was a meatpacking warehouse during the week! It was a *really* attractive crowd! He was sweet, the Jews were really nice!)

I asked Mackenzie about her responsibilities as a producer. "Well, Peggy Feury was a narcoleptic, so it would usually start with trying to get Peggy to wake up at six in the morning for an early call. Calling it 'producing' is like really, we all did everything. John was director so he took most responsibility, but Boda did a lot of it, I did a lot of it. You know, holding the mike boom, getting coffee, going around for things, doing props, doing continuity, anything. One of the things that was a big fat joke was that according to the union we had to have a production manager. So even at that point Joe Masetfield got paid, I think \$500 a day. Unbelievable. All he had to do was screech and yell 'time is money' at people every five minutes! At one point they made us have a Teamster boss, there was some ridiculousness where he had to be paid a thousand dollars a day to come and check on us.

Exterior shooting incorporated some footage taken in the Catskill Mountains, and the North shore of Long Island near Oyster Bay. David's bedroom was actually cinematographer Boda Bakur's New York apartment. Sidney Mackenzie recalls, "The estate was actually my uncle's. We went to look at everybody's house who might possibly put up with us. My uncle was away for most of the shoot and he never filmed on the inside." Ballard continues, "We did

the shooting in 1968, about 75% of it, some in 1969, and over the years until 1978 we'd shoot a little scene here, a cutaway there. The orphanage scenes were shot in 1968 on Roosevelt Island, where bits of *The French Connection* were filmed. We were experimenting with a really wide-angle lens, which you couldn't get on an Arriflex, you couldn't get a real fish-eye. So we had to rig one from a Nikon. For the long orphanage tracking shot, we used a spider dolly, where the wheels on the dolly were so you can get it through a doorway."



inevitably, some scenes were cut together from footage spread over several years shooting, as Ballard explains. "There's the scene where Mary is in the basement hanging up the sheets, and it's obviously some sort of fantasy scene because there are a lot of sheets there! So she senses someone else is in the room, there's a little wind, the sheets flapping, and she sees the shadow behind a sheet. She pulls the sheet back and there are just clothes hanging there and she thinks that's it. Then she's grabbed and tossed in the sheets by these unseen hands and stabbed. And that was done with hardly any blood back in 1968, with the bloodier shots added in 1970-71."

Post-Production

When it came to making sense of the patchwork of material Ballard was fortunate to work closely with one of the film industry's most respected editors, Ralph Rosenblum. Mackenzie recalls, "We got stuck on the editing at one point so I said 'okay, don't tell me what the films are, you've liked the editing of,' and he went through a list of films and believe it or not every one of them had been edited by Ralph Rosenblum! He had edited *On the Waterfront* and a lot of amazing things." Ballard adds, "Ralph Rosenblum had edited *The Pawnbroker*, he really saved the career of William Friedkin, who had made a movie called *The Night They Raped Minsky* that was a year and a half in the editing room, and he edited all of Woody Allen's early films. I worked as an editor for ten years off and on, on this film of mine a lot of it at Ralph's place, where Woody would be in one room and I'd be in another room and Ralph would be going back and forth. So I got to go to all the early mixes of *Annie Hall*, *Sleeper* and four of us in a room."

Rosenblum's skill at salvaging troubled productions helped when Afolabi Ajayi died during production just as it had when Bert Lahr died during the shooting of Friedkin's *The Night They Raped Minsky*. Ballard was also editing the film at home, as he explains, "I bought an old Moviola and taught myself how to edit. My whole apartment was filled, I was living with the film. I was desperately obsessive with some of the cuttings, so physical, you develop a

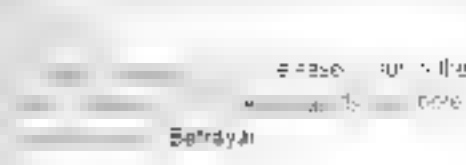
As everything he busts or ber removed or under

opposite page 3
Scenes from a film

David enjoys a smoking ceremony with
David as high priest of his own race
Charles the Chimpantzee
David's real
Apple-Betty Da

ORIGINAL MOVIE SOUNDTRACK

Featuring the title song
I Need to Live Alone Again
composed and performed
by JANIS IAN



certain rhythm where you can really see the spaces go by as they're screened. You rent a little theatre, bring some reels up, look at it on the big screen, bring it home, edit on that little postcard-size screen on the Moviola, and then there's the sound editing, when you get into multiple tracks. It's just like a giant sewing machine basically! Some scenes, like the ape attack, you keep shortening and shortening things, there's a tendency to do that, and then you wind up with perfectly cut individual scenes, but when you put them with other scenes they're out of balance. So what Ralph was good at was looking at the whole and then coming down from there. Ralph did all the finishing." Incidentally, *The Orphan's* assistant editor, Rosenblum's protégé Susan E. Morse, went on to edit all of Woody Allen's films between *Manhattan* in 1979 and *Celebrity* in 1998.

It was during this long process that Ballard came within an ace of a directing job that could have put his name on the big-time circuit: *The Exorcist*. "My agent brought me in. We were down to like three directors. I was interested in the material but I really wanted to do something very different with it. I thought it was very wooden, in a way. I really didn't think it would go very far" (laughs). I didn't care for it.

Last Minute Changes

In 1977, with the film stalled and still unfinished, Ballard began to think about another project based on his observations of inner-city black youth. The planned project was called "Hoops." Unexpectedly, however, this new idea provided the impetus for *The Orphan's* belated completion: "I started work on 'Hoops' and I had these two people come to

see me, Sandra Gilman and Louise Westergaard, who wound up producing on Broadway but they hadn't done any entertainment before, so I was kind of their guinea pig. "Hoops" was going to be a totally opposite thing to *The Orphan*, a drama-documentary about inner-city basketball, which was unknown at the time. Sandra and Louise wanted to see something else I had done so I showed them *The Orphan*, and they said, "Well, why don't we finish this off first?"

Ballard has mixed feelings about their influence on his fortunes. "They were great in getting the money together but they also had a kind of puritanical streak. Because they had children, they didn't want their children seeing certain films. As it turned out it was just a tax shelter deal for this Texas investor who came in. So they wound up hacking apart Ralph's work on the film. We filmed some extra scenes which were good. We had to shoot an alternate scene of the dad, so the parents die in the fight. First the boy has an idealistic view of his parents, but then you see them arguing at that same birthday party where she's dressed up in the wings and bird feathers. She lunges at him and he has a toasting fork and it goes into her neck. So we did all that and it was just too bloody for them, so we staged the gun scene. But then they cut out the sexual scenes and the little surrealist scenes that had all these other meanings.

Gilman and Westergaard also insisted on a title change quite breathtaking in its meaninglessness. Says Ballard, "It was called *Betrayal* when they first saw it, but they wanted to make it more of a horror thing. *The Friday the 13th* title wasn't my idea at all, although we were actually ahead of the other production. They put in these chunky-looking block lettering titles. I thought *The Orphan* was fine, and then they wanted to do *Friday the 13th: The Orphan*. They wanted a gimmick, a hook, and they just imposed it on the film. They put in these dates, captions, you know, and then the last date was Friday the 13th."

Ballard's final cut, as finished by Ralph Rosenblum, was 110 minutes. However, by the time the Westergaards had finished with it, the film was down to 80 minutes. "We had so much beautiful stuff that's not in there, things that added dimensions and texture," Ballard says, ruefully.

Another area of contention was the score, handled by Teo Macero. Ballard recalls, "I had met him. I was going to get Joe Zawinul and Weather Report, but they were too far out for Sandra and Louise. Then it was between Leonard Cohen and Janis Ian to do the title song. Sidney knew John Hammond the legendary record producer with Columbia, and he had Leonard Cohen and Janis Ian see the movie, and we ended up with Janis."

Janis Ian, who provides the theme song "I Need to Live Alone Again" (recorded in 1977) was riding high at the time thanks to a million-selling single, "At Seventeen," in 1975 and a succession of international hit albums. Between the Lines (1975), Aftertones (1976) and Miracle Row (1977). Ian's first hit single "Society's Child" (1965), told the story of an inter-racial love affair and was consequently banned on some American radio stations at the time, although it went on to be her first major hit. Unfortunately, "I Need to Live Alone Again" adds a historic mawkishness to *The Orphan*, and is one of the least persuasive elements of the package. It's a pity you can't help thinking that Leonard Cohen's tender, mournful baritone would have fit the film like a glove. Teo Macero, whose contribution to the rest of the score is much better, is best known for his groundbreaking collaborations with Miles Davis. He was the prime architect of Davis's electric sound on such albums as

hatches Brew On the Corner and the stunning *Get Up with It* for which he developed a number of new *beatnik* treatments. Macero and Davis pioneered a cut-and-paste approach, recording long open-ended jams with the Miles Davis Band and then looping sections, editing and assembling whittos that were dense with multi-tracked and created sounds (ideas that were heresy to jazz purists but helped bring Miles's music to a new generation of rock and avant-garde music fans).⁴

So, in its drastically compressed and pointlessly retitled version, *Friday the 13th: The Orphan* finally opened, at the 1978 Miami Film Festival. I went on to play it Times Square in November 1979, and drew headlines such as "New York adopts *The Orphan*!" from *Variety*. The trade magazine *Boxoffice* listed it as their highest rating item for that month. However, the momentum was not exploited by distributors World Northal, and without a second film waiting in the wings, the opportunity to capitulate soon died away.

Missing Scenes

The version of *The Orphan* available today is missing around thirty minutes from the original Ralph Rosenblum cut. The LK video runs 73m 45s. Here, John Ballard describes a few of the scenes that were removed.

1) "I was forced to remove a scene where Martha sees Mary showering, and fantasizes first that the girl is making love with a man in the shower, and then that she herself is in the shower with the man.

2) "There was a scene in which Peggy Leary has an erotic fantasy about Afrani Ajaya. She goes to his cabin and has oral sex, where we see her going down his stomach. I didn't mind that being taken out."

3) "The other key scene was with the doctor, before the boy's tongue is removed. The aunt is worried about his coughing all the time, and the doctor comes and they have him stick out his tongue. It was a precursor of the tongue scene later. It's all done with these wide-angle lenses, nightmarish, with a flashlight in the dark, but it was *so* *good*."

4) "A dream sequence we start off with a lamp, and a moth circled by bulb. David reaches for it and gets a shock, looks at his hand, and sees all these ants pouring out of his palm and up his forearm. So he rubs them off and as he's rubbing his arm, his arm comes off. He doesn't know what to do and he's frantic, so he runs into the bathroom and that's where he starts flushing his clothes down the toilet.

5) "There was a structural design to the film, to do with pastel autumnal scenes at the beginning and cold winter scenes at the end, but because the film was restructured for its final release this structure is compromised, with scenes from winter added to the early stages.

6) "At the very end, you've seen the cook killed in the basement and then the aunt shot by David. At the end he's making the toast and the maid, Mary, reappears in the door with her suitcase because she's leaving because she just can't stand it any more and says, 'Where's your aunt?' and he just looks at her like he's seeing a ghost, and says, 'Oh, I think she went down to the chicken coop a while ago,' which is the line from the Sak story. So then you're left thinking, 'Well she's still alive, so maybe he actually did *kill* the aunt?' So it makes you rethink the whole film, which of course they did in *The Sixth Sense*!"

Sredni Vashitar

Sredni Vashitar, like many of Saki's stories, is so short I could probably reproduce it here in its entirety (especially as it's out of copyright). In order to look at Ballard's treatment of the tale, here instead is a *prequel* with quotes

Conradin, a ten-year-old boy, is bitterly resented by his cousin-guardian Mrs. De Ropp. In his eyes she represents *those three-fifths of the world that are necessary and disagreeable and real, the other two-fifths, in perpetual antagonism to the foregoing, were summed up in himself and his imagination*. For her part, "Mrs. De Ropp would never, in her homeliest moments, have confessed to herself that she disliked Conradin, though she might have been dimly aware that thwarting him "for his good" was a duty which she did not find particularly arduous.

Which it is can't help comes hatred, and defiance.

Conradin hated her with a desperate sincerity which he was perfectly able to mask. Such few pleasures as he could contrive for himself gained an added relish from the likelihood that they would be displeasing to his guardian.

Conradin's sanctuary is a disused tool-shed at the end of the grounds. "Within its walls Conradin found a haven, something that took in the varying aspects of a playroom and a cathedral. He had peopled it with a legion of familiar phantoms, evoked partly from fragments of history and partly from his own brain, but it also boasted two inmates of its *own* blood. In one corner lived a ragged-plumaged Houdan hen, on which the boy lavished an affection that had scarcely another outlet. Further back in the gloom stood a large hutch. [This was the haunt of a large polecat-ferret. Conradin was dreadfully afraid of the little, sharp-jawed beast, but it was his most treasured possession. Its very presence in the tool-shed was a secret and fearful joy.] And one day, out of Heaven knows what material, he spun the heart a wonderful name and from that moment it grew into a god and a religion.

Mrs. De Ropp begins to resent the boy's hide-away, and escalates hostilities by getting rid of his beloved hen. However, far from providing an anguished and furious reaction, Conradin remains silent. Mrs. De Ropp is disconcerted: "Something perhaps in his white set face gave her a momentary qualm. Down at the shed, Conradin redoubles his devotions, concocting a hymn in worship of his furry idol and making an unspecified request: "Do one thing for me, *Sredni Vashitar*!" When Mrs. De Ropp makes another visit to the shed, to throw out the ferret, Conradin observes her from his window, furiously chanting a self-written hymn:

*Sredni Vashitar went forth
His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white,
His enemies called for peace, but he brought them death
Sredni Vashitar the Beautiful!*

His mind consumed with the threat of losing his "wonderful god" Conradin watches, and watches, in dread that "the Woman will emerge victorious. He chants his hymn, over and over, and at last there emerges through the doorway,

a long, low, yellow-and-brown beast, with eyes as black as the waning daylight and dark wet stains around the fur of jaws and throat. A "sour-faced maid" asks where the ferret is, and Conradin calmly states, "She went down to the shed some time ago." As the household staff go looking screaming and sobbing at what they find, Conradin calmly makes himself some toast at the fireplace.



Saki's story, barely 1,700 words in length, has an economy of line that guides us back to our own childhood recollections. The details of the tale are spare and archetypal through which our private memories sweep like visiting ghosts. Even 'well-adjusted' adults can probably remember if they try, the sensation of being thwarted by a parent or controlling adult, prevented from doing this, ordered to do that. You don't need to have borne a psychotic grudge to empathise with the bright flare of Conrad's childhood rage. Meanwhile, the writer's elegant, sardonic phrasing weaves a cradle for the fury and the sweet satisfaction of the end: it settles the old score, wit eclipses bitterness.

A motherless child, Munro was raised by strict, socially hidebound female relatives who, he believed, exhibited cruelty and spite in the maintenance of their authority (He is said to have based Mrs. De Ropp on his aunt). While some have accused the writer of misogyny, Munro merely reserves his anger for women whose parenting skills revolve purely around the exercise of power. Of course, for a child even a small thing, like the forbidding of toast in *Sredni Vashtar*, can assume the status of a mountainous injustice and inspire incandescent moments of rage. Such flash-flood hatreds are thankfully 'civilised' out of the majority. But when the injustice takes the form of isolation, or the destruction of one's private world, this leads to deeper pools of anger and it's here that the Saki story touches, lightly but succulently, on the way psychological disorder is constructed by childhood experience.

Ballard describes his approach: "It was not meant to be a story of a bad seed, a killer kid. It was around the time of *The Son of Sam* and it was more about what turns a normal healthy child into a killer? He is systematically betrayed by all the adults in his life. The cook walks out on him, the African guy walks out on him, and his well-meaning aunt has all these good intentions about reforming him from the bad influence of the father and confines him to his room, and the boy just retreats into this fantasy world. So you blur this distinction between killing and willing someone to die. Even infants can be filled with hate and rage when they're abused or hurt in some way.

Saki is not the only literary influence on *The Orphan*: William Faulkner and Henry James are also touchstones. The aunt's paranoia is very much in the style of the James novel *The Turn of the Screw*, and the child's encounter with truth through eavesdropping is consciously drawn from Faulkner, as Ballard explains: "There's a scene I stole from a Faulkner book, where the boy is under the bed, and the two adults come in and there's complete frontal nudity in the scene, not in an erotic sense, but it's terrifying to the child. In Faulkner, a boy locks himself in a closet and there's this sex scene going on outside and he's ingesting toothpaste and that always stayed with me." The scene is from Faulkner's 1932 novel *Light in August*. A five-year-old orphan boy called Joe Christmas – so-called due to being left at the orphanage on Christmas day – suffers, "in a way that will warp his future relationships with women: while hiding in a closet, eating toothpaste, he becomes an inadvertent eavesdropper on the orphanage's female dietitian having sex with another member of staff. He has no understanding of what's really happening, but he is discovered when the toothpaste he's eaten makes him vomit. From hereon, fear – reprisals, he lives with a constant threat of punishment, but also confusion, because the woman gave him a dollar. Joe doesn't realise that the woman fears exposure as much as he fears reprisal: the

dollar, intended to buy his silence, merely cements in his mind the notion of women as capricious and irrational.

So in what way does *The Orphan* relate to the director's own experience? Ballard explains, "It's autobiographical on a psychological level. The conversations that you hear as a kid really shape you. You can shake them, but sometimes it takes making a movie to do it! There were a lot of arguments behind closed doors, they created an emotional well for the film. My mother was incapable of being around and raising children, she just didn't have a gift for that, and she was very neurotic and self-centred. It somewhat psychologically destroyed my sister, who was older than me. She was kind of a buffer, it all got acted out on her. So I have always had a deep feeling for people who are picked on, for instance, their weight, or some deformity, in terms of horror, what's really horrifying to me is someone mistaking someone's outward appearance for what they are – for instance, when I was sixteen I wrote a screenplay about the Elephant Man.

I mention to Ballard that while the Aunt is portrayed as destructive, Mary the maid (a cousin of the Saki story) is likeable and sympathetic. "The aunt is a horrendous yes," Ballard says, "which kinda echoes my own childhood. I've done some soul-searching on that. You don't realise until you've worked it all the way through, and then you say 'Ah!' As far as the maid goes, I think when you're fortunate the redeeming factor can be if you have someone like Mary. My older sister was a very loving person who I was very close to, so that can help in your future relationships. In the film David speaks of her as a mother, we even had some insinuation that she and the father had a relationship and the child could be the offspring.

Sidney Mackenzie says, "John had a penchant for Saki because of the very dark turn in there that isn't quite resolved. I'm surprised more people haven't adapted Saki's work because it's very psychological, it's very complex and true. John had gone to Harvard and majored in psychology and sociology, and one of his teachers was Robert Coles – so he'd had a lot of exposure to stuff on early childhood.

A major component of Saki's story that remains unchanged in the film is the boy's rejection of Christianity in favour of his own hybrid religion. Mackenzie came in America in the late 1960s, there was this odd mix of drug culture and people coming from Tibet and various parts of the East to teach in this country. There was a mélange of religious trips that people came back from and reported about, and a terrible longing to find something in Eastern meditational traditions that, you know, nobody had found in the Southern Baptists. This filtered in and out of discussions we had. The religious impulse in children is something that John has always been interested in, and it certainly interested me an awful lot too, especially when it is to do with compensating for a severe abandonment trauma that happens very young. The rage and violence that results from that sort of early trauma is a very complicated and confusing combination for a child.

And the idealised father, so important in *The Orphan*? Mackenzie's perspective as a Jungian psychologist is

from the beginning. If you look at us, rushing over here, get away from the King, in one form or another, and the King is one idealised father figure after another. It's very immature what's going on here, and very scary. And now they're all toppling, corporate heads, idiot presidents, the fathers of the Church, and of course people are suffering unthinkable here: the depression and despair and

hopelessness. It's a terribly important point of maturational growth in the culture, but whether or not we're going to make it over the hump or around the corner.

For Ballard, the idealised father figure in *The Orphan* is partly a response to the fact that his own father was 'removed by age'. "I used to listen outside the door, my father was fifty-one years older than me, and I'd listen to see if he was asleep or if he was going to die. I was afraid he was going to die. My father was distant inasmuch as he was so much older than me, but I loved him and worshipped him."

Hoops

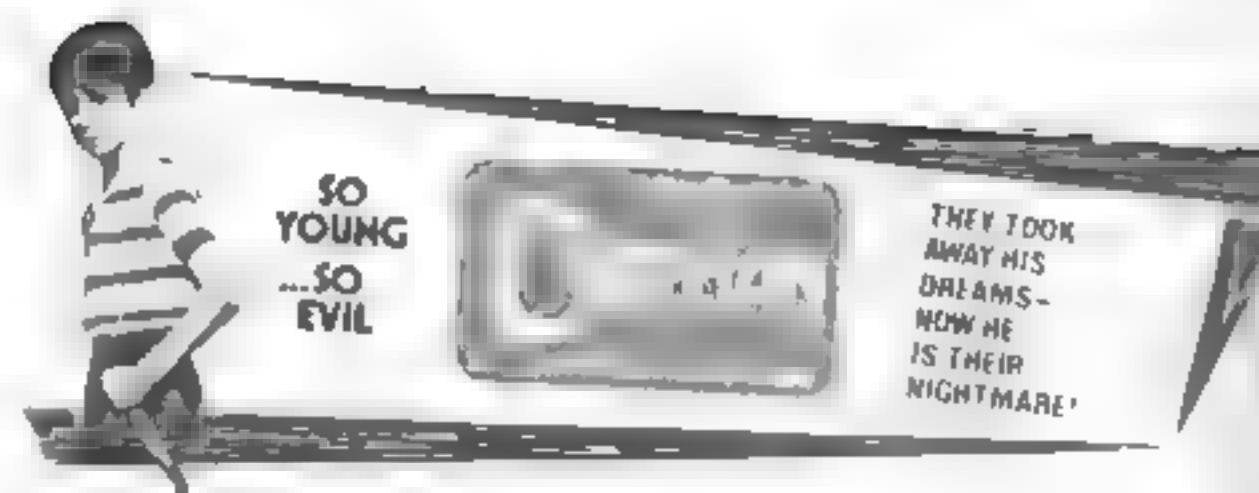
After *The Orphan* was released,⁶ Ballard went back to work on *Hoops*. "Basketball was not the phenomenon it is now. I had shot some screen-tests with Earl Monroe, captain of the New York Knicks, and Sheila Frazier who was in *Superfly*. I had lined up The Jackson Five, I was running screenings trying to raise money to finish it. I had Dino De Laurentiis there, a lot of people lined up. We had James Earl Jones's father Robert E. Jones. Eventually I was flown out to Hollywood and they wanted us to change the coach to a white person! Whereas it was really a father-son story between a black kid and a black coach! So we refused to do it, and a year later *The White Shadow* came out on TV about a white coach and black inner-city kids, from the same studio we showed our thing to."

Ballard took one more body-blow before retiring from film: "I did a script about extreme sports. We had all the finance in place, it was going to be done by Cannon Films and I was all set to direct it, and one of the key actors pulled out to make *The Pirates of Penzance*" (TV movie, 1980).

Race and human rights issues were nothing new to Ballard. In the mid-1960s, while still at Harvard, Ballard made contact with activists in the Civil Rights movement. The flashpoint was the infamous occasion in Selma, Alabama on 7 March, 1965, when a peaceful civil rights protest highlighting the region's violation of black voting rights was blockaded and prevented from marching on the State capital, Montgomery. Police attacked the protestors with appalling violence, but their tactics were captured on the TV news, nationwide, providing a clarion call for hundreds of supporters to converge on Selma for two further marches. The third was at last given right of way. Ballard was one of those who headed down to the region to lend his support. He worked alongside Martin Luther King, and spent time in an Alabama jail for his outspoken and practical involvement in the protests. Sidney Mackenzie arrests, "When he was at Harvard it was in the middle of a lot of the really difficult racial stuff in this country, so he went with Robert Coles, and on his own a lot to Alabama on all those marches, Montgomery and so on. He's a very tall, red-headed guy and he stands out in a crowd. He has a tremendous empathy for the plight of people who are discriminated against in one way or another, whether racially or in a family circumstance."

Back in New York, Ballard continued to seek ways to assist black youth in the city: "I was working up in Harlem at the time. Mayor Lindsay was trying to run a 'fusion' ticket and I and this young girl called Melba Hill⁷ opened a community centre so that disenfranchised black people there could have a voice to help them get what they should have from the city. For instance, we helped Claude Brown, who wrote *Manchild in the Promised Land* [published in 1965], we introduced him to Tom Wolfe."

Growing Pains



Ballard's passionate concern for racial equality rose again, undimmed, in the 1980s. After the abortive attempt to film *Hoops*, he turned to publishing. Ballard says, "In the early eighties, when I started to write books on Afro-American themes, I hired an Afro-American writer, Walter Jean Myers, to write the novel *Hoops* and it was turned down by various different publishing houses who said, 'Black kids don't read.' We finally got a publishing house to do it and won a best book of the year award." (*Hoops* was published in 1981 by Delacorte Press. A sequel called *The Outside Shot*, also written by Myers from a screenplay treatment by Ballard, was published in 1984.)

Ballard followed with several books for children and young adults, inspired by his trips to India and the African continent as a voluntary worker during the mid-eighties. "I've always been interested in anything which shows up how people are. So when you collide two cultures, what comes up in that collision is who you are, what your identity is. I didn't have much money but I talked my way onto a relief flight in 1985 to Sudan, which was a war-torn area, and Ethiopia, delivering food during the famine. That provided the basis for my books." The books concern a recurring character called 'MacBurnie King', a white teenage girl who travels through the Third World keeping a diary of her experiences. She first appears in *Monsoon: A Journey to End World Hunger*, published in 1985. The saga continued in 1993 with *Brothers and Sisters: Real Love Knows No Boundaries* (which featured an introduction by Nelson Mandela), doubled-up with another Ballard book, *The Soul Guide to African-American Consciousness: Reclaiming Your History*. The books have met with wildly diverse responses from the trade. Kirkus Reviews called his work "a sprawling mix of fact and fiction [...] mostly exhortatory, Afrocentric [...] says on African history and culture", going on to say,

Though obviously a labour of love, and packed with worthy information, these well-meaning but impossibly cluttered and disorganized volumes will be less useful than non-fiction of narrower scope." The School Library Journal offers a quite different perspective, reviewing *Brothers and Sisters: Real Love Knows No Boundaries*, a contributing teacher described it as, *A real hodgepodge of both fact and fiction. There are a lot of different typefaces used: bold, small print, large print, and headers. It is an interesting and arresting way of writing and of putting a book together, and should appeal to*

Blaxploitation, Separatism, Humanism

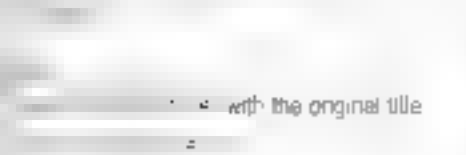
I asked Ballard, considering his interest in race issues both in cinema and writing, what he thought of the spate of blaxploitation films made during the 1970s, and their current vogue in the popular cinema of Quentin Tarantino. "Sweet Sweetback was creative, most of the others were

An American adrift for the first time

In a dream, Aunt Martha appears as a man and Martha and Dr. Thompson don't rise from the grave before swooping to remove his tongue. David confronts his nemesis and 'Charlie gets involved'.



gives the role of Martha
Graham



with the original title

© 1992



really stupid. It's the same feeling I have about Tarantino. He has a wonderful talent with actors, but what is he doing? He's like a wannabe black person. It's understandable, now that things have shifted, but having lived through all the violence in the sixties... Tarantino is a genius with actors, but to what end? When he discovers that if he ever does, he's going to be unstoppable.

In the '60s, when Ballard and Melba Hull were working together in New York, Ballard had his first encounter with black separatism: as a white man writing on black culture, it would not be the last. "Melba Hull was part of a group called 'Voices of East Harlem' singing black history songs, from slave days through jazz. They had a show doing this in '68. She took me to a theatre where LeRoi Jones was, and he refused to let me in the theatre which basically showed me his racist thinking."

Sometimes there's a feeling that you have to be black to write about black people, you have to be a woman to write about women. I don't subscribe to that at all. As an artist, if you operate that way you could never write a character. You may never know or understand the full depths of what another person goes through, but it's in the effort to do that that you're going to find art. You know, we inhabit a bag of skin, we're looking out through two eyeholes, and you and I have no choice over the family we were born into, the colour of skin we were born into, the life we were born into. What you do have some choice over is to do something with that.

It's depending on where you're born! To me the essence is seeing yourself in another person. The extent to which you can do that is the extent to which you can be human.

Epilogue

Ballard and Mackenzie – the honest and engaging, the insightful and humorous – are among the most thoughtful and genuine people I've encountered in the writing of this book. They make the perfect team for a film that explores the trauma, magic, fears and desires of childhood. Like young David in the film, *The Orphan* was nurtured carefully for its first ten years, before the well-meaning but clumsy ministrations of an interloper. Unlike poor Aunt Martha Sandra Gilman and Louise Westergaard made it away with their lives and of course we should be glad they at least showed an interest in the film. More importantly, *The Orphan's* proud parents, Ballard and Mackenzie, unlike their onscreen counterparts, lived to see their offspring reach a kind of maturity – achieving a brief spell in the New York spotlight, with the *Variety* headlines to prove it.

1. Ambiguities are central to the finale of this film, and cast special light on the earlier scenes.

2. Future director of *Carry* (1980) and *Nobody's Perfect* (1981).

Best known for shooting *Jaws* and *The Conversation*.

4. Macero was deeply influenced by his friend, the composer Edgard Varèse, whose *Poème électronique* (1957) first convinced him of the possibilities of electronic music allied to acoustic instrumentation. Macero's music for *The Orphan* is largely orchestral although there are significant sections utilising studio effects and electronic treatments. Horner Denison, credited with adult orchestration on *The Orphan*, would work with Howard Shore as a regular orchestrator throughout the 1980s and '90s, on *The Dead Ringers* and *Naked Lunch*.

5. A child psychiatrist and professor at Harvard, author of more than fifty books specialising in the moral, political, and spiritual sensibilities of children.

6. A novelisation by Samantha Mellores, from Ballard's screenplay was published by Jove Publications in '90.

7. Went on to become Melba Moore, the singer.

8. Everett Leroy LeRoi Jones: poet, playwright, polemicist. Involved with the Beats in the late 1950s/early 1960s, he eventually left their sphere to concentrate exclusively on racial subjects. In 1961 he helped start the American Theater For Poets, and in 1962 the Black Arts Repertory Theater. After the assassination of Malcolm X in '65, Jones left that racial integration was impossible and began espousing black nationalist ideology. In 1968 he became a Muslim, changing his name to Amiri Baraka.



Blood Relations

The Films of Irv & Wayne Berwick

with Wayne Berwick and friend and film producer Ted Newman

Hitch Hike to Hell (1977)

Geeky, mother-loving Howard (Robert Gribbin) is a deli very driver for loveable old grouch Mr. Baldwin (John Harmon). The job brings Howard into contact with a constant stream of hitch hikers, mostly girls, running away from cruel or oppressive parents, ignoring their reasons for leaving. Howard begs them to return to their mothers. If they refuse, he develops a bad case of the nervous twitches and drives them off-road for sexual molestation and murder. The reason? Howard's sister Judy hitchhiked out of town and broke momma's heart. When Howard's mutilated victims start turning up dead, Police Captain Shaw (Russell Johnson from TV's *Gilligan's Island*) tries his best to increase awareness that a killer is on the loose, although the self-absorbed parents of a runaway girl brought in for jaywalking provide a glimpse of what he's up against. Howard, meanwhile, barely remembers his atrocities afterwards, and as for his moribund mother (Dorothy Bennett), even when her son suffers flashbacks and goes into psychotic rages, she does nothing. Eventually, after Howard murders a little girl of eleven, Shaw tracks him down to Baldwin's business and arrests him, with the help of the killer's shocked workmates.

Although the narrative is overstretched and the psychology is rudimentary, this is an effective shocker with a gradually more oppressive awareness of the reality behind the headlines that inspired it. Perhaps unintentionally, Berwick sets up a strong *frisson* between generic object matter and the earnest social commentary of the script. Like any exploitation picture with a moral point to make, *Hitch Hike to Hell* is a confused and confusing experience. Is it a shameless piece of trashy fun, or a grim warning to teenagers and their parents, delivered at the height of America's serial-killer onslaught? Schizophrenically a bit of both, *Hitch Hike to Hell* shakes the dust off problems that are undisturbed in other less conflicted exploitation films.

The commercial horror cinema of the 1970s demanded victims, preferably female. Given the excesses of the day, a sexual emphasis was par for the course, and *Hitch Hike to Hell* is no exception. So far so sleazy. Irv Berwick, however, cut his teeth on a series of noirish melodramas in the early 1960s – *The Seventh Commandment*, *The Street Is My Beat* and *Strange*

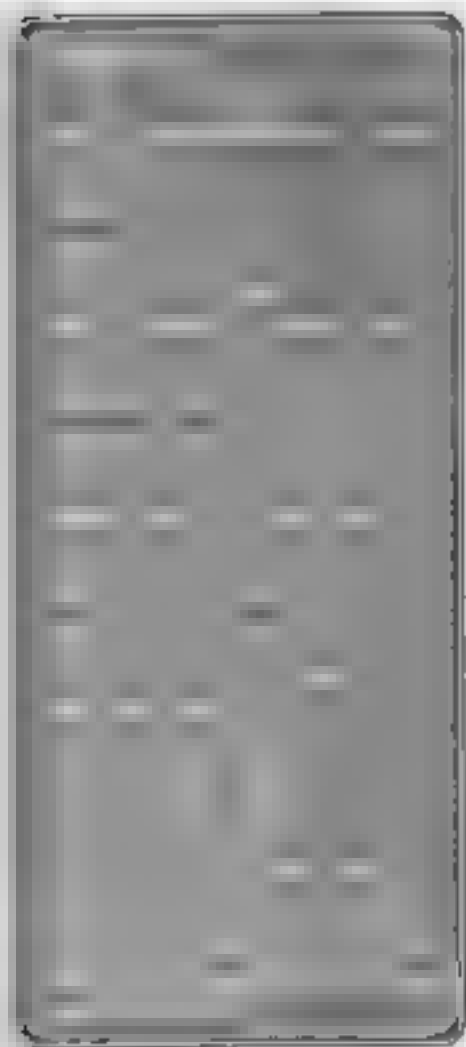
Compulsion – which gained their narrative energy from putting characters through various moral crises. Something tells me that Berwick automatically sought to include a moral dimension here too, even though the context is so different. It may just have been the natural impulse of a man whose screen model was more like y Edgar Ulmer than Herschell Gordon Lewis, but despite *Hitch Hike*'s shallow storyline by John Buckley, Berwick takes the themes seriously enough to complicate our responses. As the script hedges the audience about the need for parents to take better care of their children, the latter part of the film aims for a feeling of appalled grief. However, as this comes hot on the heels of a couple of goating rape-murders shot for maximum excitement, an unforgiving audience could easily read the film's moral concern as hypocrisy.

Part of the problem is the lead character. Robert Gribbin's 'Howard' is a meek, wimpish cartoon nerd, a flic and twitches, an out-of-date cinematic cypher rooted in a post-*Psycho* rut. He's an amusing creation, but given the then-current reality to which the film alludes, he makes a poor fit with the horror. It's not the actor's fault, it's just that the film is freighted with references to horrors beyond his dramatic range. There's the chit of contemporary anxieties in the script's reference to San Francisco's 'Zodiac Killer' (never caught), L.A.'s 'Skid-Row Slasher' (Vaughn Greenwood) and 'that nut down in Houston' (Dean Corll). Berwick's sixties films were dark, certainly, but they were essentially moralist melodramas, stories with convoluted plots and stylized acting, taking place in a parallel world of film. For all their grubby, anguished glimpses of the real world, they keep a degree of dramatic distance. Berwick's *The Seventh Commandment* plays a most like a nastier, grimmer *Twilight Zone* episode. *Hitch Hike to Hell* uses the rash of brutal serial killer slayings that plagued California in the 1970s as meat for a plot, in the same way that a headline about corrupt priests dealing drugs, or somesuch, would generate noisish material for the thrillers Berwick used to make. The horrendous crimes of men like Ted Bundy, Vaughn Greenwood, Edmund Kemper or Dean Corll, however, probably require a darker, more realistic tone, which is precisely what *Hitch Hike* lacks.

We seem to be getting rather heavy – so I should point out that I do enjoy this film, and besides, this book covers

One of my favourite films is *Hitch Hike to Hell*, this one from DVD, which is, I think, Bernard Girard's *A Name for Evil*, George Fenady's *Terror in the Wax Museum*, Robert H. Oliver's *Frankenstein's Castle* and Antonio Margheri's *Web of the Spider*.





Films far more depraved, explicit and brutal than *Hitch Hike to Hell*, and they don't *all* get hauled over the coals. It's worth taking a second, then, to understand why these thoughts are coalescing around Irv Berwick's movie. The two main murder scenes are not totally explicit – we see breasts but no full nudity, and the violence – both victims are beaten and strangled – is bloodless – but they achieve power through the frenzied performances of the victims and the frantic, fast-paced music, which cranks up the initial excitement to the max. (Elsewhere the music cues are lifted from the same library record David Cronenberg used for his second feature film *Rabid*.) The first onscreen killing (Jacquelyn Posejey's 'Sharon') has the most impact, and it's one reason why the moral themes create so much friction: there's a leering, in-your-face quality that cues you up for a goading, amoral exercise in sadism. The second killing we see (Jane Ratliff's 'Gail') also has a charge, despite Gribbin's poor acting: he's meant to be miming rape, but he never even gets his flies undone. Nevertheless, when he strangles the teenager with a coat-hanger, in the back of his grungy old van, recollections of – or real-life crimes (see postscript) send a chill down your spine.

On the plus side, there's little in the way of crass moralising when it comes to the victims. These unfortunate young women hitching their way to Doomsville are shown sympathetically – at no point does the film side with the killer and his pathetic distiches. In fact blame is often landed squarely on the parents, especially in the case of one couple who refuse to collect their runaway daughter after she's picked up by the police: "Seems there are delinquent parents as well as delinquent children," a cop observes, helpfully underlining the film's moral theme. Significantly, the killer's doting mother is shown to have a distinctly un-maternal streak when the subject of her own runaway daughter is brought up. Seeing a newspaper article about the rape and murder of a hitch hiker (one of her son's victims), she speculates that maybe the same thing happened to Judy: "If it did she, had it come."

The parade of pretty young women is complicated by the introduction of a young man and a little girl. It's as if halfway through his cautionary tale writer John Buckley became anxious about the exploitation elements and sought to remedy things by making the victims less titillating. Unfortunately, Berwick chooses not to show these later murders onscreen, which means the chance is lost to shock audiences with less salacious footage of a young man and a child being attacked. The depiction of the (flamboyantly gay) male

victim (Don Lewis) is another slight miscalculation. He's introduced with a silly piece of music clearly meant to overdetermine the character: none of the female victims are treated humorously, so why this one? Geeky, unworldly Howard fails to pick up on the verbal hints the young man drops about his sexuality, so maybe the comical music was the director's gauche way of making sure the same couldn't be said of his audience?

More successfully, it's with child victim Lisa (Sheryl Lynn) that the mood really darkens. Although the murder itself is not shown, the scene where cops take Lisa's mother to a rubbish skip to identify her daughter's body crashes the film right down off its exploitation high. When the police captain opens the lid of a rubbish skip to reveal the child's dead body, the film at last confronts the darkness inherent in its subject matter. *FBI* marks to Mury Ellen Christie, who plays the distressed mother: her cries shred our nerves as she freaks out, fights with the police, and tries awkwardly to reach her dead daughter.

Viewers can probably have more fun than I seem to be having here by simply ignoring the moral angle, instead watching *Hitch Hike to Hell* as a slightly cheesy, slightly nasty horror/exploitation flick. That's just what I did on first viewing, and a fine time I had, too. Thinking about it, I seem to have been affected by just a handful of scenes, and a couple of a most casual details: perhaps all I'm really saying is that the film doesn't go far enough in evoking the gh: i behind the tabloid headlines that inspired it.

POSTSCRIPT Certain details of the film are uncannily echoed in the vile sex crimes of Lawrence Bittaker and Roy Norris – committed two years after the film was made in the summer and autumn of 1979, barely twenty miles south of the film's Malibu and Topanga locations. Bittaker met Norris, a convicted rapist in jail in 1978 when he was serving time for assault. The two bonded, and hatched a plot to kidnap, rape and murder teenage girls, tape-recording the events for their later amusement. Paroled in November 1978, Bittaker bought a silver van he nicknamed 'Murder Mack' and when buddy Norris was released on 15 June, 1979, the pair were soon driving round the streets of Hermosa and Redondo Beach, Los Angeles. Their first known victim, sixteen-year-old Lucinda Schaeffer, was abducted on 24 June, 1979, to be followed by at least four more girls between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. Several of the victims were hitch hikers. Sixteen-year-old Shirley Ledford, the fifth known victim, was abducted on 11 October and found the next morning in a residential district. After mutilating her breasts with pliers and beating her repeatedly with a hammer, Bittaker strangled her to death in the back of his van – with a coat hanger. On 20 November, Bittaker and Norris were arrested on charges stemming from the testimony of a woman who had escaped after being abducted in Bittaker's van. While in custody Norris cracked and admitted to the murders. He stated that he and Bittaker approached girls at random, offered rides, then drove them to a remote mountain road where they were tortured, raped and murdered. Tape recordings of the victims' final moments proved so horrific when played in court that jurors fled the courtroom to be sick. Norris pleaded guilty on five counts of murder, turned State's evidence against Bittaker, and received a sentence of forty-five years to life. Bittaker denied everything but was declared guilty and sentenced to death in 1989. At the time of writing he remains alive on Death Row.



... work in *Hitch Hike to Hell*

... man image
... released *Microwave Massacre*
... in the Spring of 1983. Their
... also included such
... classics as H.G. Lewis's *Blood Feast*,
... Jones's *Abducted*, Mel Zarch's
... *Split on Your Grave*, George A. Romero's
... *Season of the Witch*, and Michael Findlay's
... .

... severed head continues to express her

Massacre It's a word that really gets a lot of attention. Movie makers certainly thought so, because not on the hooves of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* came *Northfork: A Massacre*, *North Creek Massacre*, *Massacre*, *Manston*, and *Massacre at Central High*. Films without the word in their titles were quickly massacred up for re-release. Frederick Friedel's *Axe* became *California Axe Massacre* for instance. The word seethes with connotations of indiscriminate violence: post-Manson, in the serial killing seventies, it promised a nerve-shredding, gut-churning movie experience. But to help with the serious overtones, it was only a matter of time before some enterprising joker seized upon this over-worked horror huzzword for comedic purposes. Enter, Wayne Berwick Wayne had a Massacre for us, alright, heated up and ready to go – a *Microwave Massacre*.

Microwave Massacre? Ha-ha, you're thinking – surely a one-trick-pony, a total waste of time? Well, some might say so. ("Overplayed for cheap laughs [...] the film ends up being neither horrific nor funny." *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia: Horror*) For me, though, it has a curious charm. *Microwave Massacre* is no one's *Citizen Kane* – who would be dumb enough to demand such a thing? – but I've watched it more times than *Kane*, which must count for something.

When I first saw *Microwave Massacre* on the video shelves in 1983, I'd only just begun to explore what was out there. Comedy in horror was anathema to me. I wanted my horror films nasty, brutal and sick. I wanted *Last House on the Left* or *I Spilt on Your Grave*. *Microwave Massacre* sounded – well, silly. And it is. Very silly. There's no point hiding the fact, *Microwave Massacre* is just as daft as it sounds.

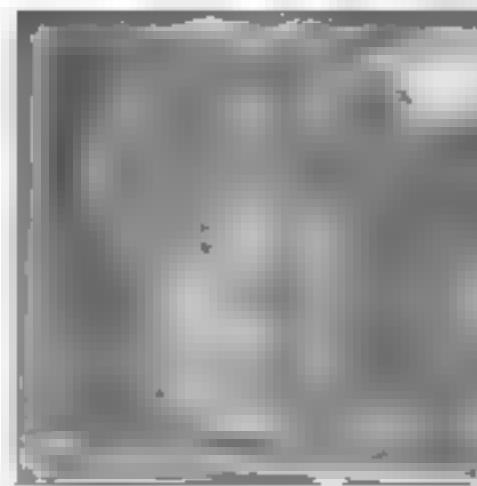
But if you can roll with that, you're laughing. Donald (Jackie Vernon), a depressed blue-collar slub, is stuck in a hellish marriage to his shrewish wife May (Claire Ginsberg), whose obsession withordon-blue cookery is driving him to the edge of madness, a situation made worse by his spouse's mean tongue. "You're a walking contraceptive," she snaps. Bad food, no sex, verbal humiliation – why, it's inevitable after a drunken domestic argument, Donald beats May to death with a connoisseur's pepper grinder. Next morning, he discovers that in the previous night's drunken frenzy, things had gone even further beyond the marriage vows: drunk to the moon, and taking advantage of his wife's extravagant use of kitchen accessories, he'd stuck her in the microwave. Mortified, he hides the body by cutting it up and shoving the parts in the freezer, but after a while he forgets which foil-wrapped parcels are which. Soon, he's sharing the meat with his work buddies, who develop a taste for Donald's lunch-time treats. And when he runs out of May, Donald stocks up on more prime cuts, from a succession of glamorous prostitutes.

Guilty pleasure time. I don't know quite how this one has worked its way into my life but I've watched it at least six times, and I'll probably watch it six more. It's like a seventies-era *Carry On* envisaged by a moon-glaring *Saturday Night Live* scriptwriter aiming to batz the video nasty market, with all the rough edges that description suggests. The humour is a mixture of better one-liners, blue-collar coarseness and classic hen-pecked husband routines. The latter were old-fashioned even in 1978, based



around the sort of "Take my wife – I'm in a bit of a hurry" gag. It feels like an awkward comedy. A *Carry On* or Bob Hope Jackie Vernon once, imitating the voice of *Frankie the Snailman* in the US, mooches like a whipped cur through the town, giving the film a cartoon dimension that is picked up and amplified by the glaring low-budget decor, which resembles some seventies hellhole rip-off from a period catalogue.

Donald's difficulties with his food-obsessed wife are treated wholesale from Hitchcock's *Frenzy*. At one point we see him at work, wrestling with a whole crab stuck in a jug. I don't know if I'm bluffing references though. Gags such as the "gory-hole" in the hanging-site boarding,





Donald Love Vernon, fantasises about murdering his wife in *Microwave Massacre*

British video box art for the *Microwave Massacre*



through which a passing chick inserts her breasts, establish the, shall we say, less cine-literate aspect of the film's humour. It's a live action version of the stuff that turns up in the funnies section of men's magazines, like it or lump.

There's a self-loathing, self-pitying quality to Donald. He thinks life is good for everyone except him, expressing the disgruntlement of working guys stuck in arduous, badly-paid jobs – men with nagging wives, little money and no sex. He's a classic Joe Schmo who views life as an endless drudge. "When I get really bored I like to drive around and see how many squashed dogs I can count on the freeways," he says. Even a visit to the pub doesn't help. "You know what it was today?" he asks an even more depressed bartender. "Tuesday," comes the reply, to which Donald adds, "Just keeps getting worse and worse." The barman is no Ted Danson either; his favourite way of cutting short unwanted intimacies from customers is to describe his personal health problems. "Haemorrhoids. That's why I had to take this job standing up. Didn't I ever tell you about my haemorrhoids? They get really bad when it's humid, you know."

Of course, there are flaws, yes, even here. Wayne Berwick told me that the target audience for *Microwave Massacre* was the stoner crowd, and it's quite likely this was the best bet, although Vernon is a shade too anaesthetic for the plan to work. The veteran comedian seems a touch under-rehearsed too, stumbling through lines here and there in a way that makes you wonder if his mind is on the job, or just the 'refreshment' he's promised himself at the end of it. And if Donald simply bought his own lunch rather than eating whatever his wife puts in his lunchbox, there would be no story. Furthermore, it's never made plausible how Donald develops a taste for human flesh. One day we see him grab something from the fridge at random and start gnawing at it, until the camera pulls back to reveal that it's May's hand. Donald sees what he's eating, pauses a beat, then continues chewing the stump. It's a gag, of course, but are we to accept that he's happy to eat such an unappetising cut? It seems a bit much to base the central plot development on a sight-gag. Soon he's tempting his workmates into cannibalism with choicer cuts, but his transition from hungry slob to cannibal gourmand is unconvincing. Then there's the microwave itself. Firstly it's gigantic, like something from the hotel kitchens in *The Shining*, so God knows how they could afford it on Donald's wages. And May's obsession with fancy cuisine seems utterly at odds: who on earth makes, or sh, connoisseur dishes using a microwave? It's a contraption

invented for convenience not finesse. But the biggest flaw is that the film never really gets to grips with Donald's change of character. When he starts murdering prostitutes, it's a bit of a wrench, credibility-wise. Killing his wife was a *crime passionnel*; killing whores is simply murder. The fact that the script continues to paint Donald as a hapless schmuck doesn't really gel with his new role of cold-blooded killer.

Quite a list of complaints. So what is it that makes film so enjoyable? I must admit it's difficult to explain. Perhaps it's the incongruity of a cannibal murder story framed by a comedy routine from a bygone era. Viewers in the U.K. should try to imagine a British version of the film, starring Les Dawson as the cannibal, and Mollie Sugden as his wife. The relentlessly lowbrow humour also has its appeal, even though most of the actual jokes have mouldy grey whiskers and a glow-in-the-dark quality. The setting – a suburban purgatory Mike Leigh might have dreamed up if he came from Los Angeles – is another feature, but the charm is somewhere in-between these not entirely plausible explanations. Maybe it's just that Donald's sympathetic loser persona strikes sparks against the increasingly cynical and cold-blooded action. In terms of visual style, there are some arresting shots of naked women lying on a black table in a black room, being sliced with a kitchen knife as blatanly phoney stage blood emerges. And Robert Burns's prosthetics are impressive, including some convincing severed hands (perhaps 'heid over' for Alfredo Zacharias's *Demmand*, on which Burns worked later). It really is hard to sum up, but I don't want to make too much of a meal of the conundrum. Some of you can probably already scent the aroma of summering movie-trash (not to be confused with bad y burlesque, although a mixture of both would be junk movie heaven). If so, my picky-eater caveats will seem like just the sumperings of a quiche-loving art-snob.

A final word of warning: if you're finding my food jokes a touch indigestible, you'll get the runs from *Microwave Massacre*. If you give it a try, though, you may find the film a diverting, geniusly bizarre curio – even if it is as much of an acquired taste as a crab in a hap.





When you think of father-son film directing dynasties in the movie industry, who comes to mind? Melvin and Mario Van Peebles? Car and Rob Reiner? How about father-daughter combos like David and Jennifer Lynch, or Dario and Asia Argento? Well, horror fans can add another pair to this roll-call: Irv and Wayne Berwick. While there are few similarities between the work of father and son, apart from the low budgets with which they had to work, it is somehow very pleasing to know that while Berwick Jr. was prepping a comedy-gore number called *Microbial Massacre*, Berwick Sr. was shooting a sadistic psycho-movie, *Hitch Hike to Hell*. To quote Jim Siedow's *Cook in The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*: "This family always been in meat."

Early Days

Irv 'Irv' Berwick was born in 1915 and raised in The Bronx, New York, one of a family of Romanian Jews originally called Bereovici. A child prodigy, he was playing concert piano before the age of ten. Although he never abandoned the instrument, he decided to seek a film career instead, hopping on a Greyhound bus to California when he was just seventeen. He first obtained work as an acting extra, and appeared as a billboard model for White Owl cigars. His son Wayne recalls, "He talked about a guy called Max Arnov,¹ he used to say that's the guy who got him started, brought him to Universal. He lived in Hollywood with four or five friends, who stayed friends throughout his life." One of these friends was John Harmon, a character actor who would go on to appear in well over two hundred films over his fifty-year career. Harmon became a tatismatic presence in many of Berwick's films, including *The Monster of Piedras Blancas*, *The Seventh Commandment*, *The Street Is My Beat*, *Hitch Hike to Hell*, *Lawn Party*, and *Matibu High*.

After military service in World War II, Berwick returned to Hollywood and was hired by Columbia Pictures as a trainee director and dialogue coach. The extent of his work at that time is difficult to verify completely, as much of it went uncredited. Some of the jobs he accepted were for smaller production companies away from the Columbia lot, including the 1947 Groucho Marx 'solo' vehicle *Copacabana*, with Carmen Miranda. In addition to the verified duties listed in his filmography, writer and documentary filmmaker Ted Newsom, a long-time family friend to the Berwicks, recalls that Irv spoke of having worked with William Castle—who was at Columbia Pictures adapting mystery series² such as *The Whistler* and *Crime Doctor* from radio to the big screen. Castle moved to Universal in 1949 and Berwick followed, settling in as dialogue director for a string of westerns and crime melodramas, starting with Alfred E. Green's *Sierra* (1950) and continuing throughout the fifties, for directors like Kurt Neumann, Hugo Fregonese, Budd Boetticher and George Sherman. (Newsom recalls that in 1952 Berwick worked on Sherman's Errol Flynn picture *Against All Flags*. "[Irv] told me he had to spend time as the Flynn wrangler. He

was pissed off at the end of shooting because Flynn gave him a gift, a bottle of expensive liquor. Irv was angry because he didn't drink Jesus. If he still had that bottle he could probably sell it for \$1,000 on eBay. Booze from Errol Flynn.") One of his most regular employers was one-man B-movie factory Lew Landers, with whom he first worked on *The Power of the Whistler* in 1945. Landers was a close friend of the Berwick family—he was known to young Wayne and his sister as "Uncle Lew"—and he often put work Berwick's way, including a useful regular job as dialogue director on the CBS television series *Tipper*, which ran from 1953 to 1955.

The Monster of Piedras Blancas

In the early 1950s Berwick moved to Universal-International, working with the great Jack Arnold as dialogue director on his crime melodrama *The Glass Key* (1953) starring Edward G. Robinson, and the western *Red Sundown* (1956). When Universal-International laid-off many of its employees in the late fifties—following a merger with MCA—Berwick formed his own production company called Van Wick Productions (later Irv-Mor), with Jack Kevan, a gifted make-up designer and one of those responsible for the Gull-Man in Jack Arnold's *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. With Kevan eager to develop his own talents, the choice of genre was a no-brainer: their first picture, *The Monster of Piedras Blancas* (1958) was a *Creature from the Black Lagoon* 'variant' shot entirely on location at Point Conception (which provided the lighthouse scenes) and Cayucos, California. Piedras Blancas ('White Rocks') itself, a real town on the California coast north of San Simeon, was rejected as insufficiently photogenic.

Although the film was an independent production, Universal supplied equipment and crew members from their recently laid-off staff. In an act that neatly (if unintentionally) summarizes the incestuous nature of genre pictures, Kevan made the monster suit from bits and pieces of the Universal monsters he'd worked on: the hands were borrowed from *The Mole People* (Kevan had designed their faces), and the feet were from the famous Melanaran monster in *This Island Earth*. Kevan simply built a new head, and bingo: The Piedras Blancas monster was born.

The Monster of Piedras Blancas is a film very much of its time, and for a certain audience it will evoke happy memories of a cinema that is no more, where men in bizarre rubber monster suits stalk the detritus of small



The Monster of Piedras Blancas (1958)
© 1958 Universal-International, Inc.



← 10 → • *Piedras Blancas*

town communities, homing inexorably on the prettiest young female and her Brylcreemed, T-shirt clad boyfriend. For those brought up on later strains of horror cinema, such movies can seem slow-moving to the point of boredom, but *Piedras Blancas* has a few brief shots that sufficed to make it an alarming experience for the teenagers of its day. When the monster eventually goes on the rampage, it bursts into a room full of shocked citizens, brandishing the severed head of a recent victim in its scaly claw. There's even a hint of blood around the neck. For '958, this was strong meat: blood was a rare sight indeed in the horror films of the time. A later shot of the severed head, discarded on the beach, is given an extra *frisson* by the added detail of a live crab crawling over it: it's a grotesque image, not unlike a similar scene in Mario Bava's *Twitch of the Death Wrist* (1971), in which a squid slides over the face of a corpse fished from the water. These details aside, though, it's a film whose appeal is very firmly rooted in its time. For modern audiences, the storyline of *Piedras Blancas* (written by H. Halie Chace) is unremarkable, and more than half an hour passes before we actually see the monster. Perhaps the young Don Dohier was watching, resolving to make films just like it – but with monsters that pounce every ten minutes.

Ted Newsom, who first met Berwick while attending a class Berwick taught at UCLA in the late 1970s, remembers that "Irv was rather diffident about *Piedras Blancas*, even embarrassed when I asked him about it. Several years later, long after such a thing was necessary, he remained concerned that I should bring the film up when talking to Jack Arnold. Arnold and Berwick were long time friends – because he thought Arnold would get upset that *Piedras* was a lift from *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. I asked Arnold if there was some sort of ill-feeling, and he just laughed and said no, of course not. The common denominator was, of course, Jack Kevan, who was Irv's friend and partner in Van Wick Productions. Kevan had grown extremely disillusioned with the studio system and, rightly, felt he never got proper credit for the monster creations at Universal. Taking the bows was the job of Bud Westmore, who apparently would come in when the work was done, pose with 'the toon' (a little penis-shaped sculpting suck) and *voilà*. Another masterpiece from the great House of Westmore! Kevan said to hell with it and became a producer. This lasted with Irv until about '62 or '63, when Kevan, at the suggestion of his wife, got out of the movie business entirely. He started a cosmetics company and apparently did well financially. However, he would never, ever discuss his movie make-up career with anyone. After Kevan went on to other things, Irv formed J & M Productions, a contraction of his name and his wife Mary."

Making *The Monster of Piedras Blancas* as an independent, Berwick developed a thriftiness that would stand him in good stead for his later work. Newsom continues: "Irv was always leery of what he thought was big production expense, like special effects. He often said the *Piedras Blancas* suit cost \$30,000 – which would've been true had it been done from scratch at Universal – and was probably the approximate price tag Kevan put on it. However, Kevan was able to pull new moulds from the various other elements at Universal, which saved time. Latex, 'cause I didn't cost that much, and since Kevan was co-producer, he didn't charge for his time. It probably cost about \$4,000 max, maybe as little as \$1,000 in actual

expense. It later shows up in colour in an episode of *Flipper*, by the way. Ricou Browning – who played the original *Black Lagoon* (all 'Man) was the co-producer of the show, and Browning and Kevan were old pals. So Irv avoided projects that needed anything elaborate or special. He had this one crappy script around the office for years written by Halie (pronounced 'Hallie') Chace, and had a latex burn make-up in the office for at least five years. I guess he thought it would be so expensive to re-do this prosthetic appliance, he should keep it around in case he ever did Chace's burn-victim movie. So that's why he didn't do any more horror movies (except psycho-stuff like *Touch Hike to Hell*). He occasionally returned to assistant directing and second unit stuff. He worked on Larry Buchanan's *The Loch Ness Horror* for instance (uncredited, I think). He shot the action stuff.² He also worked on *Spartacus*, although he dismissed it and in fact wanted it kept quiet, saying, "nobody's supposed to know Kubrick has help on that."

Berwick's Noir Trio

As the sixties got under way, Berwick's output continued but on a darker vein. It's a major leap, stylistically, from the lightweight *The Monster of Piedras Blancas* to the lurid, noirish dramas Berwick made in the '60s, beginning with *The Seventh Commandment*, a complex guilt-and-cruelty tale which he directed and co-wrote (with Jack Kevan) in 1960. Described by one admirer, director Frank Henenlotter, as "an improbable mix of noirish sex, spirituality, and obsession" it concerns Ted Mathews (Jonathan Kidd), a young man who suffers amnesia after staggering away from a car accident involving him and his girlfriend Terry (Lyn Statten). He's taken in by a travelling preacher (Frank Arvidson), and several years later returns to his hometown as the Rev. Tad Morgan, a genuine healer with supernatural powers, still unaware of his previous life. Meanwhile Terry, who was injured in the accident and is now a bitter ex-convict living in a sleazy apartment with Pete (John Hutton), her crooked boyfriend, decides to take her revenge on the now-respectable preacher by blackmailing him. Ted ends up marrying her while drunk, out of his mind, wrongly convinced by this mean-spirited vixen that he caused the crash that started the whole sordid tale. As things spiral downwards for the luckless 'Reverend' the story's cocktail of guilt and revenge leads inexorably to murder.

The Seventh Commandment was shot in Dallas, Texas, and featured soon-to-be horror specialist S.F. Brown as sound mixer. It's a great advertisement for Berwick's newly matured style: it has some great sniping dialogue (When he hero mentions his educational achievements, Terry sneers, "B.A.? What's that? Bad apple?") and an intriguing take on religious hypocrisy. When the Reverend's past catches up with him – or Terry's manufactured version of it, at least – Ted/Tad is tempted to do the decent thing and give himself up to the police. However, with business in the miracle trade booming, and donations skyrocketing, his business partner (and fellow Christian) argues thus, "You can will not give yourself up. That would ease your suffering. That would make everything alright in your eyes. But what about His eyes? What right does a sinner have to question His wisdom? If it were not the Lord's will, you would never have started this work. No, you will not give yourself up to any authorities. There's only one authority,

The Dead One



for you. It's the sort of se... you're...
masquerading as piety you can imagine Jim Bakker
convicted on twenty-four counts of fraud and
embezzlement or Jimmy Swaggart photographed with a
Louisiana hooker outside a Travel Inn having with
herselves as they snort cocaine, commit adultery, or steal
from the collection box.

Berwick made many friends in the Dallas region,
including trash film maestro Larry Buchanan, coming
here to shoot several times over the next twenty years. He
followed *The Seventh Commandment* with two similarly
dark and twisted nastiness melodramas. Unfortunately they
cannot be further explored here, as both *Strange
Compulsion* and *The Street Is My Best* are unavailable on
either DVD or video. *Strange Compulsion* is particularly
hard to research: few critics seem to have caught this
Berwick effort shot in Texas in 1964 and released in
December that year. At least the American Film Institute
catalog preserves a brief synopsis, revealing that the story
concerns a young medical student afflicted with
compulsive voyeurism, who turns to psychoanalysis
whereupon the origin and nature of his obsession is
revealed. *The Street Is My Best* (1966) is a variant on *The
Naked Kiss*, and reputedly has some genuine subtleties
according to Ted Newsom, it was Berwick's favourite of
his own films. It was written by Jack Kevan and Harold
Livingston (the latter a regular scriptwriter for *Mission
Impossible* who later wrote the screenplay for the first *Star
Trek* film) and tells the tale of seventeen-year-old Della
Marinson (Sherry Marshall), who marries an older man
Phil Demarest (Todd Lasswell) to escape from the misery
of life with her selfish father (John Harmon) and
domineering mother (Annabelle Weenick aka Anne
MacAdams, leading player of the S.F. Brownings
repertory). But her happiness is short-lived: she discovers

that Phil is a professional procurer for out-of-town
businessmen. In order to control her life, he entraps Della
as a hotel-room prostitute. Her parents' disapproval and
subsequent scandal make it impossible for Della to get
regular work and she gives in to Phil's suggestions
becoming a high-priced call girl. When Della catches Phil
in bed with another woman she informs on him to the
police and goes it alone. Soon she's on the slippery slope to
ruin, gaining a drink problem, living in cheap hotel rooms
just another cheap streetwalker. One night she gets
involved in a fight with a drunk and falls into the path of
an oncoming car. She's admitted to hospital, only to be
confronted by her parents.

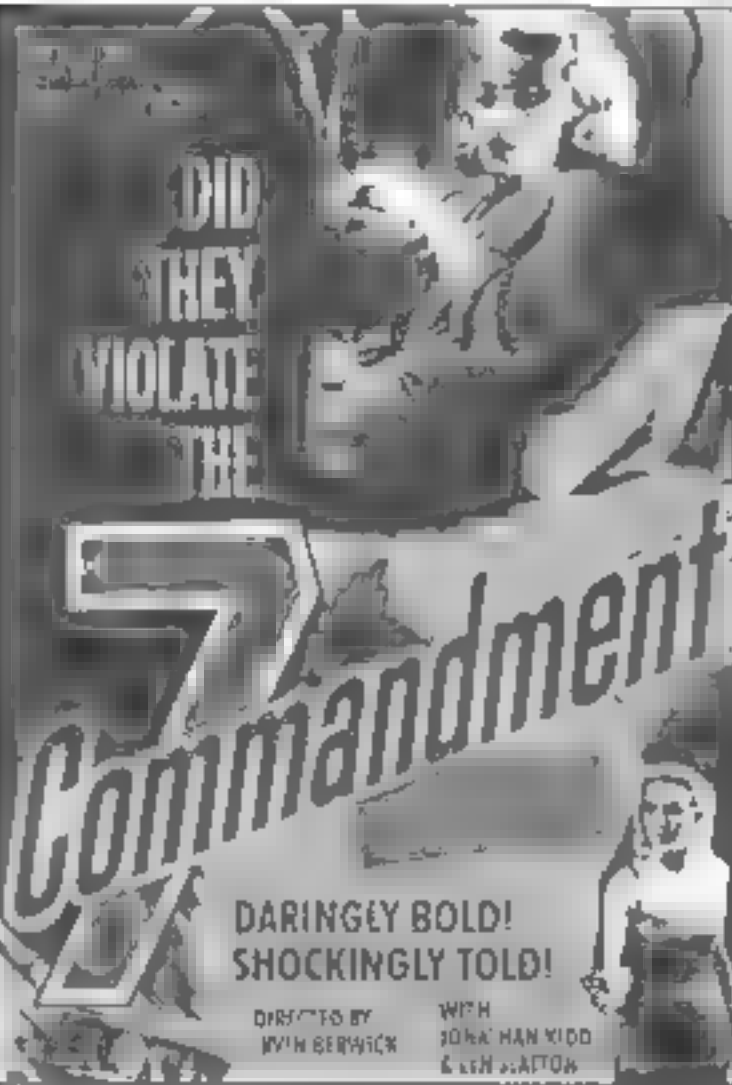
Ready for Anything?

It was in Texas that Berwick shot the first of his
sexpotation films, *Ready for Anything* (1968), which has
never previously been included as part of the Berwick
canon. (The film is credited simply to Darcia J. Ward.)
Berwick informs me that his father began making studies
with *Ready for Anything* and essayed perhaps as many as
ten more in the following ten years, although some may
have been unreleased. The Texan provenance is indicated by
the presence of one of the Buchanan clan, R.L. Buchanan
as cinematographer (he was the assistant cameraman on
Larry Buchanan pictures from 1967: *Creature of
Destruction* and *In the Year 2889* and Ludwig Moner as
assistant cameraman (Moner another fixture of the Dallas
film scene, worked on *Dracula* (*The Dirty Old Man*) and
regularly teamed up with Ron Scott, a director of studies
who appeared in several Larry Buchanan films). Wayne
doesn't remember the name "Darcia", which initially had me
worried that there could be two films of the same title
kicking around in '68, but nevertheless – judging by the
Dallas connections – this is apparently a genuine Irwin
Berwick film. Wayne Berwick explains, "He was making
X-rated pictures around 1970 – including *Ready for
Anything*, and *Sexual Hangup* (Irwin Productions). He felt
uncomfortable with me working on *Ready for Anything* – I
think. We talked about it one time and I said, 'If you're not
uncomfortable with it then I'm certainly not.' It was just a
job. I worked on *Sexual Hangup* and some others that never
got released and I don't even remember the titles. He
probably made about fifteen altogether. He always used the
same DP for every single movie and that was Bill de Diego,
a real fast cameraman who I think my dad met when he was
looking for people to do his first porno picture. Dad used a
pseudonym on *Sexual Hangup*, but it was my name! It was
'produced' and 'directed' by me. Actually the work I did
was the sound, the music and the editing – I edited quite a
few of my dad's girlie pictures. When I got back from
Europe in '72, my dad and my mom put together this



The Seventh Commandment movie
be the judge. Let's hope we can agree
which commandment the story is about.

Dean
Irwin Berwick's *Ready for Anything*
featured Darcia J. Ward
Buchanan's *Mars Needs Women*
Berwick's *Ready for Anything*
The Seventh Commandment



THE SCREEN SPLITS WIDE OPEN

WITH THE STORY OF GIRLS WHO ARE...
'READY FOR ANYTHING'

company called New Directions and they were going to make educational films, about things like drug abuse, stuff like that. I would do the sound and editing of those. *Sexual Hangup* actually got a release—it played in a huge theatre in Hollywood. It was a big opening, a big deal. It was softcore. There was never any penetration. It was all simulation. Now I don't know if he went further in the couple of films he did without me—I remember there was a time when he said to me look, I gotta go a little more hardcore here 'cos I'm not making any money.

Both *Ready for Anything* and *Sexual Hangup* are fiendishly obscure titles, and little else is known about them. *Ready for Anything* apparently stars Larry Tanner who appeared in Larry Buchanan's *Mars Needs Women* and *The Evil Creatures*, but it remains seemingly impossible to obtain on video or DVD. *Sexual Hangup* is even more obstinate. I've been unable to find another reference to it anywhere. Somewhere, in the garages and film-laboratory vaults and storage vestibules of America, there's an entire shadow industry of lost and forgotten films, and sadly it seems that Irv Berwick's exploitation films reside there.

Hitch Hike to Infamy

Film fans on both sides of the Atlantic know the name Irv Berwick chiefly through his psycho-killer movie *Hitch Hike to Hell*—a lurid slice of seventies sleaze that enjoyed wide distribution on video. At the time it was made, Berwick had begun teaching, as Ted Newsom recalls, "a night non-credit adult education classes for the UCLA Extension, which is how I met him. He'd eudge cigarettes from me on break—his wife Mary didn't approve of him smoking, so he had to do it when he was away. The class was called 'Low-Budget Film Production.' Probably 1977 or '78. I'd talk to him about William Castle during a break, and he remembered him fondly (he'd worked with Castle at Columbia prior to the big horror-gimmick breakthrough). During the time he was teaching, the Hillside Strangler case was ongoing in L.A. Irv was either producing or

ghost-directing something like *The Hillside Strangler Meets the Werewolf*, which I think is credited to Ray Dennis Steckler, who's pretty incompetent." At the same time, during the same eight or ten week period, and while he was still teaching, Irv made *Hitch Hike to Hell*.

Hitch Hike to Hell is a classic piece of exploitation erotica, ripping its topically tasteless story screaming from the newspaper headlines. In some ways quite unfashioned film, with a twitchy, nerdy killer more suited to the '60s than the darker 1970s, *Hitch Hike to Hell* nonetheless bears the hallmarks of the more brutal cinema of its day. Although the rape scenes are not sexually explicit, there's a pulse-racing thrill-seeking vibe to the editing, and in particular the music, sending the bad-taste meter way into the red—although in the film's defence, it doesn't commit the cardinal sin of suggesting that the victims either asked for or came to enjoy their violation. This is still not enough to prevent the film from being deemed as sexually exploitative: indeed, as Ted Newsom remembers, it was just this charge that was levelled at it by Berwick's female students when—perhaps unwisely—he screened the film for his UCLA class.

But given the moralist thread running through *Hitch Hike to Hell*, to do with the evils of bad parenting and the plight of teenage runaways, can the film can be defended on some levels? Newsom is dismissive of the script's moral equivocation, and cites Berwick. "Irv, in class, used the old phrase 'to take the curse off.' This meant, when doing a sleazeball picture, you toss some redeeming bullshit in here to pacify the blue noses."

Wayne Berwick agrees. "I don't really know how deep his morality went, in terms of his work or anything like that. He projected an attitude of 'Hey, it's exploitable, let's do it.' I don't remember dad's attitude toward the industry being anything but practical. Making films was what he did, and a gig was a gig. He viewed his own work as nothing more than what it was supposed to be. Master shot—over shoulder—close-up—and out. On budget and exploitable. Although he was very pragmatic about the business, he was very much into being 'part of the industry' and the glamour that went with it. I really don't remember much about the period of his life during *Hitch Hike to Hell* other than he was just plugging away trying to raise money to make films. The film came about the same way they all did, private investors. John Bucklev was a writer buddy of my dad's whom my dad asked to work with because he was fast. (That's all he ever said about him, he's fast. I enjoyed working as a soundman on my dad's films more than anyone's. Bing, bang, next set-up. *Hitch Hike* was no exception. A skeleton crew of film students who worked for experience, a professional DP me on sound and a friend I would hire as a boom operator, and of course always John Harmon, my godfather and my dad's best friend. Since my dad knew he wasn't making Academy Award films, he never treated any shoot like it was life or death.

Hitch Hike to Hell was snapped up for distribution by Box Office International's Harry Novak. Wayne recalls, "Irv had been friends with Harry Novak for a while through the garlic pictures. He always had a good relationship with him and I always liked him too. It gave my dad the chance to play the gangster role, because Harry was mixed up with some tough guys. My dad came from The Bronx and every now and then he'd like to get back into that tough-guy thing. He was alright with these kinds of people he grew up with them."

Bad Girls

Berwick turned back to melodrama for *Matibu High* (1978), an entertaining if rough-edged film that saw him hook up with a young tyro producer called Lawrence D. Foldes (best known to horror fans as the director of *Don't Go Near the Park*). Foldes irked rather a lot of people at the time, as Newsom explains: "Larry Foldes hired [me] to make *Matibu High*. Apparently, he was quite brilliant as a child, a genuine prodigy who graduated college by nineteen. But a prodigy is not always the best person to have as a producer. The problem with that sort of thing is, they never have the time to gain social skills. In any case, [me] produced the film *de facto*. I've seldom dealt directly with Larry Foldes, so I can't really say a great deal from personal experience. I know he and Victoria Meyerink were a number for quite some time.⁴ They're still married; they just produced a film together a couple of years ago. She apparently was very, very ill for some time and he got her through it. It sounds like he's matured into an extremely nice guy. Of course, he's nearly 50 years old now. But I always got the distinct impression Larry was gay as Christmas. Maybe he was and he didn't realise it. I don't say the latter entirely in jest. I was at the premiere screening of [Foldes's film] *The Great Skycopter Rescue*, an abomination if there ever was one. What a cast! Aldo Ray at his drunkest, William Marshall at his hammiest. Now understand, this was a cast and crew screening with potential investors and distributors there as well. So it should have been a pretty positive, receptive audience. (Larry had fired the experienced second unit DP, deciding he could shoot better stuff himself. He botched it and cost his father, who funded the film, a huge amount of dough to reshoot.) So, the illiterate hero wanders into town and buys a burger at a stand. The local thugs show up and molest a nearby girl, tearing her blouse off and posing, huffing and puffing *a la* Brando in *The Bad One* (this is in 1978, a little late for that shit.) The Local Hood (read James Dean) weighs in and beats the shit out of the bad guys, who of course vow that they'll have their revenge. Okay, the Hero has met the Local Hood. Hero says, "You want to come over and have a beer?" Sure! Cut to interior, warehouse. Decorated with large airplane models hanging from the high ceiling. Camera starts on the planes and slowly descends down to floor level as we hear the two guys talking: "So, you're new around here?" "Yeah, you know, just trying to get to know people..." The camera finally reaches ground level, and here these two nooks are, sitting side by side on a couch – in this huge room – side by side in their underwear, drinking beer. The audience absolutely roared. And Larry apparently didn't understand why this was screamingly funny. Maybe he didn't think it was unusual that two total strangers would sit cheek by jowl in their undies in a huge room, immediately after meeting. He made a sequel to *Matibu High*⁵ which was plagued with problems, including replacing the director."

Wayne Berwick has similar feelings on the subject of Foldes: "Dad and Bill de Diego worked together on some fifteen films, and they always had the same line with each other: 'Wouldn't it be funny if this was the one?' And after they did *Matibu High*, they said, 'Would you fucking believe it – this is the one – with that asshole.' Because they hated Larry Foldes. Everybody hated Larry Foldes! He was just a total egomaniacal spoiled rich kid who thought he was a producer. He'd labelled himself – and the press

caught onto it – as 'the youngest producer in Hollywood' but he'd never done anything. Then *Matibu* got picked up immediately by Crown International, that's why everybody was going around saying, 'I don't believe it, this kid got a picture into immediate distribution.' He hired my dad, who was his teacher at high school at the time, to direct. I remember my dad saw Larry giving direction to an actor one time – I was actually scared that my dad was going to take him apart. He just flipped, and right in front of everybody said, 'You don't EVER, EVER go to my actors!' He reduced him to a kid again. I remember someone telling me that the sound man on *Don't Go Near the Park* punched him out!"

Ted Newsom recalls that *Matibu High* received the odd decent review, although Newsom himself is harder to please: "I remember the *L.A. Times* reviewer Kevin Thomas called *Matibu High* 'a sleazy gem' and compared it to *Pandora's Box*! I caught it at a local multiplex, coming in a few minutes after it started, and hooted and laughed at the obviousness of it all, the goofy silly transsexual music. Hey, this movie is supposed to be serious – and the little music bridges make it sound like a game show!" When the lights came up, I realised [me] and several other people were about six rows from me. They wondered who the horse's ass was who was laughing through the movie. "Gee, I said, I dunno, yeah, I heard it, too."

Matibu High does indeed wall under an absurdly inappropriate score, some of which sounds like shopping-mall-music or something from a twee sixties ad-campaign. It's a shame, because it's actually a fairly tough little drama with some great misanthropic dialogue. J.B. Lansing plays Kim Bentley, a teenage tramp with a sociopathic streak a mile wide, who intends to get on in the world no matter what it takes. She's full of contempt for her frumpy mother, harbours a severe grudge against the boyfriend who ditched her, and seduces her teachers in order to blackmail them into giving her top grades. When the headmaster drops by intending to tell Kim's mother that her daughter's been caught cheating, Kim (home alone) gives the old fool a heart-attack by inviting him in, stripping naked and rubbing her tits in his face. This girl is *dangerous*.

The classroom scenes have a John Waters feel to them; you can imagine Kim hanging out with Divine's Dawn Davenport in *Femula Trouble*. She tells her mother she's doing "relief work" when the poor dear asks where the new car and fancy clothes are coming from, and as she moves up through the ranks, from hooker to high-class escort to contract killer, she grows to love delivering paybacks on the stupid world around her. Lansing has a slightly gawky coarseness that's almost androgynous at times, and she possesses a great pancake-flat attitude when delivering lines like, "I really got off on the power of that trigger. Now when do I get paid?" – the movie's worth seeing for her performance alone.

The raucous, exciting rape-music from *Hitch Hike to Hell* puts in another appearance, this time accompanying a scene in which a nasty punier tries to handcuff Kim and subject her to an S&M violation. The rest of the music is really a puzzle though. Did Berwick and the inexperienced Lawrence Foldes think the film was too dark, and needed cheering up with muzak? Or were they under the impression that cheesy stock-commercial cues would improve the film's chances with the MPAA? This ill-advised use of music dates the film terribly, even as the script tries to upgrade the clichés of wild youth from the fifties to the late seventies. Another handicap



opposite picture-story page to page 100
More mayhem from Hitch Hike to Hell

below and you'll see
Although *Ready for Anything* has
seemingly been lost, we do have these
evocative and elegant 1970s-era
which thankfully preserves Berwick's
pseudonym of Garbo for posterity





STUART TAYLOR RATIC JOHNSON
 DYLLIS BENSON AL MANNING
 TAMMIE TAYLOR JOHN HARMON
 with special guest JILL LANSING as NIM
 Directed by LAWRENCE FOLDES
 Produced by WILIAM D. BERWICK
 Screenplay by WILIAM D. BERWICK
 Music by DAN PERRY
 A STAR CENTRA PRODUCTION
 A CROWN INTERNATIONAL PICTURES RELEASE

4. "Every Teacher in School Wanted to FLUNK HER But Nobody Dared!"
 5. "Malibu High as the..."
 6. "The UK video..."
 7. "The actress..."

is Bill de Diego's camerawork, which is unadventurous and unhelpful. The camera often just stares at the actors, when a cleverer approach could have broadened the film's appeal. It's a testament to the lead actress and the pulpy script that such deficiencies don't cut the whole thing off at the knees. If Berwick was the sort of guy to attempt satire, this story could profitably have been played as such, setting off as a light and frothy comedy and then becoming gradually more crazy and misanthropic. It could have ended up rather like Michael Lehman's wondrous, *Heathers* (1989). Still, it's a strong enough tale well served by the cast, and definitely worth checking out. Not that you'd guess from the promotional artwork for *Malibu High*, which gives no hint of the blackness of the content. Wayne Berwick explains: "Crown International hired a model to do the one-sheet, and she wasn't even in it. It was a T&A shot of this sexy girl on the beach looking flirtatiously at the camera, a complete 180-degree turn from the film, which was a real dark, most sleazy movie. But then *The Street Is My Beat* and *The Seventh Commandment* were kinda sleazy too, what my dad called his 'early-garlic pictures'—only *Monster of Pudget Sound* was any different."

At least one version of *Malibu High* spared the audience's blushes, although it's unlikely to appeal to exploitation fans, as Newsom explains: "Another thing that

kills it, in its TV version, is the editing to cover the nudity and four sex scenes. They just cut to the same damned shot of a field of grass at sunset near the beach, panning over it for as long as the scene takes—15 seconds, 45 seconds, three minutes. That's a lot of grass."

As noted, Irv Berwick continued making adult films through the seventies, but he tried his hand at other fare too, no matter how incongruous. Wayne explains: "He made this thing called *Suddenly the Light*, a religious film. In between the porn he was doing religious films! This was '78, same year as *Malibu High*. I did two films that year with him. We shot it out in Dallas with Baptist money; spent the summer out there in the Dallas heat, with a film student crew and Bill de Diego. My dad loved to shoot in Dallas, one because there was a studio here called Jamieson Studios and a great film lab that he liked, plus it was a 'right to work' state, so there was never any problem with the unions. He loved Dallas."

Ted Newsom was involved in another of Berwick's religious pictures. "I worked for Irv on the crew once, on a short film that was tentatively titled *Lawn Party*, a funny thing done for some Baptist folk down in Texas. I think I ended up playing a part in a scene with the lead kid when our actor didn't show up. And that was shot out here in California. It was really something else. When we were

shooting it. I thought *Lower Party* was the lamest title I'd ever seen. Irv had a 6mm print of it and showed it one night at his house to friends (contemporaries, so they were all in their sixties). I'm afraid Craig Muckler and I, and perhaps Wayne, were not very respectful to it. It was some silly thing about a kid who loses his faith when he realises his dad is working with a crooked real estate guy. The Good Kid fails in with a Bad Kid and robs a grocery store (John Harmon played the owner). The kids leave, have an off-screen auto accident and the Good Kid ends up in the hospital, clinging to life. A cop takes the despondent father aside and says, 'He wasn't making much sense. He was saying something like, "Please God, don't let my father go through with this crooked real estate scheme." What do you suppose he meant by that? Honest to God, that was the dialogue verbatim. I loved it and memorised it, it was so lame. Irv wasn't a bit religious though. Not unreligious either. He was Jewish, for goodness sake, and he's directing films for the holy rollers. Irv would do anything if it paid. He bit's and looked pretty fun.

Farewell to Berwick Sr

Things got tough for Irv Berwick in the latter stages of his life. Wayne feels that his father grew more cynical about his work, and felt ground down by the process, over the years. He would have preferred to be an actor. He started out working with actors, and he was an actor at heart. He used it in his life – he could be the tough guy when he was with the tough guys, and he could play the charmer too. He was an incredible charmer, especially with the ladies, not in a phony way, but he really loved women. We'd sit in a coffee shop and an elderly woman would come in, and he'd say to me, 'Look at her eyes and her make-up; she's spent some time. I'm gonna go over to her and tell her how beautiful she is.' You'd see her all night up, and he'd come back and finish his lunch. He was a very emotional guy, but not on the set. He was very easy-going but it was all about speed, and keeping in budget. And that's why Bill de Diego was so important, they knew the next thing to do immediately, there was never any need for discussion.

Ted Newsom recalls: "A lot of the life went out of Irv when his wife died in 1982. She was a rock. She was a teacher as I recall, and worked steadily. Irv's productions were sporadic, since that's the nature of the business. Late in his life he moved from their house to a condo. He was burgled and lots of his memorabilia was stolen. Really rotten." Wayne adds, "He just worshipped my mom, and everybody figured he's not gonna last long, but he toughed it out. Irv Berwick did indeed tough it out for another fifteen years. When he finally died of heart failure on 29 June, 1997, he was 82.

It's a great pity that many of Irv Berwick's films are impossible to see today. That may not matter too much where his sex films are concerned, but on the strength of *The Seventh Commandment*, the obscurity that beuevils *Strange Compulsion* and *The Street Is My Beat* is infuriating. If Wayne Berwick is right, we're lacking at least eight, if not ten further film credits for his father, and although these are likely to be ephemera, it would be good one day to have a true picture of the entire scope of his work. In many ways, Berwick's career parallels that of John Hayes (see chapter on Hayes), in that both men directed a handful of accomplished black-and-white melodramas before moving

into the horror genre and sexploitation material in the 1970s. A viewing of Hayes's pseudonymous sex films actively sheds valuable further light on his creativity, and although Berwick would seem perhaps less motivated to create art under such unpromising conditions, you never can tell. At least we have four good examples of his craft: a classic fifties monster movie; a lively pulp melodrama; a hard horror film, and – perhaps the most unusual – a curious, bitter-edged coming-of-age crime story. Even these few movies guarantee Irv Berwick a place in the history of American independent cinema.

Wayne Berwick – Early Days

Wayne Berwick was born on 10 July, 1949 in North Hollywood, CA. Movies have been an intrinsic part of his life for as long as he can remember. "I literally grew up on the soundstages at Universal Studios. My dad was a dialogue director there for the first eight years of my life and my mom would hang out there and take me with her. Guys like Tony Curtis, Burt Lancaster and Edward G. Robinson would be lifting me up, ruffin' my hair and chattering with me all the time. I think the first movie I saw was a Ray Harryhausen *Simbad* thing.⁶ Whatever it was, it hooked me enough that forty-five years later, if I don't get my movie fix, I get uneasy.

Like his father, Wayne Berwick is also a musician – but unlike his father he has turned this talent into a career. Initially the idea of directing a movie didn't occur to him. "It was something my dad did, but after high school when I moved out of the house, I needed a real job. I moved to Venice Beach and tied my way into a gig as a sound recordist for an educational film company. Turned out to be a one-man operation. This guy did everything – he was his whole crew, and he needed someone to at least run sound, to take some of the load off. So naturally, I learned and did everything as well. It was during this time that I became enthralled with the process, and for the next two years he and I made dozens of ten- and twenty-minute mini-movies with some sort of health or safety message – usually whatever was hot at the time. I remember getting a lot of mileage out of VD! [Laughs] He wanted to make a career out of it, but I wanted to go to Europe, so I packed a guitar, some harmonicas and some underwear and went. I played in and visited just about everywhere except Eastern Europe. Berwick left midway through 1970 and returned in 1972. Once back home again, he began supplementing his musician's income by working as a soundman on low-budget films, ranging, as he says, "from G to X" rating. It was during this time I started making Super-8 films. On one of my soundman gigs in the summer of 1978, I became good friends with a couple of the associate producers. One of them had an outline for a tongue-in-cheek but creepy horror film. The other one claimed he could write the script and raise the \$75,000 that I said I could make a for. By October 1978 we were shooting. Problem was, the script he turned in seven days before principal photography was to begin, was ninety pages of bad one-liners. What had been creepy understated humour was completely over the top in the face. It was quite an adjustment, so my take on it was to make it even more blatant, as I'd to say, 'You thought *this* was stupid? Well we're havin' so much fun that, here, have some more!' When I saw the script, I knew the only one way to go with it, and that was to aim for the alcohol and reefer crowd."

Ingredients

The script of course was *Microwave Massacre* and Berwick's partners in crime were Craig Muckler and Tom Vernon. Vernon was, and still is, an L.A. sports reporter for newspapers, while Muckler—who had been involved in the production of Berwick Sr.'s *Matthi High*, hosted his own cable TV show at the time, called *Craig Muckler's Hollywood Showcase*. Among his guests were Aldo Ray, William Sanderson, Misty Rowe, Bo Svenson—and he soon-to-be star of *Microwave Massacre*. Jackie Vernon Muckler came up with the title, helped Berwick whip Singer's script into shootable form, and made the introductions to Vernon, who was quite a catch for a low-budget film by a young unknown, as Ted Newsom explains:

"Vernon was famous in the early sixties as a stand-up comedian, with a Buster Keaton-style deadpan delivery. Very put-upon character on stage; background in improv comedy à la Shelley Berman, Nichols & May, etc."

Jackie Vernon came on board before the script was finished," recalls Berwick. "He was at a point in his career where he needed the work more than he needed a script to read. He was a very recognizable comedian, his claim to fame is he's the voice of *Frash the Snowman*, which is shown a few hundred times every December. Was it a stretch for him to play a drunk? He wasn't much of a drinker and was a total pro, but word have mercy. The run out of *Qualuludes*."

Vernon is undoubtedly top banana in the cast, but he is supported by several notable eccentrics—not least the woman who plays his crazy wife. "Claire Ginsberg was a piece of work," laughs Berwick. "She was hired because she was the character she played. I remember the day she had to put her head inside the oven so when Jackie opened it we didn't hear. She wouldn't do it. Didn't want to get electrocuted. The oven was cardboard! She got hysterical. I got pissed off, and I remember her sitting in the corner on the floor shaking and sobbing uncontrollably about the way I talked to her." As for the role of the bad-tempered bartender, Berwick says: "When Phil De Carlo read for the bartender role, we immediately sent everyone else home. We were afraid if we didn't hire him he'd have us whacked. Turned out to be the nicest guy in the world."

Devotees of the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* will probably have rented *Microwave Massacre* as soon as they noticed that Robert Burns was involved. Burns's design work for the classic Toho Hooper film is, along with Charles D. Hall's work on James Whale's *Frankenstein*, probably the most creative and influential piece of set dressing in the genre's history. Berwick found him charming: "Robert Burns sent a résumé. I didn't know who he was but I sure as hell knew *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, so we met at his funky place at the beach, where he shared the place with all kinds of bodies and heads and limbs. What more could someone who was directing a cannibal comedy want? Plus Robert was a great guy."

Copy but great. By the way, I'm glad you noticed the tacky seventies brochure interior Robert and I had discussed it, and were going for it. He was very very low key, just a weird guy but very nice. All these severed heads and mummies and stuff all over the place at this little two room place he had down at the beach. He was just moving from Austin Texas out here to Venice Beach, California, and he sent us his résumé, came out for an interview. Which he didn't have to do. I mean, we saw *Texas Chain Saw*

Massacre and he was hired! He was great. No ego at all.

The film was shot quickly in the fall of '97, and Berwick enjoyed the process enormously. "Because of the attitude I took when I got the finished script (which was this better be a good time?), I really didn't have a lot of pressure. I knew from my low-budget experience, and the corners I'd earned to cut by watching my dad, that I could bring it in for \$75,000. I found out after the shoot that there wasn't one day when we had enough money to shoot the following day. The producers withheld this info so I wouldn't have to think about it. We shot fifteen days straight. The locations were all local. The house belonged to Mickey Dolenz and he'd just moved out, so it was empty. The opening scene with the girl bouncing down the street was done last minute. The opening credits were supposed to be shot in a market, and as someone is shopping in the meat department, the credits are on the meat packages. The market pulled out at the last second and we (the whole crew) were sitting around the producer's apartment trying to figure out what to do, when my dad's old T&A influence hit me. The DP had a friend with her. A cute busty friend. So that's her walking back and forth on the sidewalk in front the producer's apartment. We were pretty brazen in how we shot exteriors. We'd set up anywhere and act like we belonged. I remember shooting one day on Santa Monica Boulevard. The police just assumed we had a permit and would just drive by. When two biker cops finally stopped, I told the production manager to send over a couple of the girls we were using. They flirted with them for quite awhile, plenty of time to finish what we had to do. When you're making shots, staying low-key and keeping it out of the press to avoid any union hassles is the goal."

Cannish and Serve

Berwick got a further blast from editing his picture. "The editing process is what hooked me when I was doing the educational films. It was the illusion you could create in the room with those pieces of film that blew me away and made me want to make movies. It wasn't working with actors. I tell ya that. Editing took eight weeks, a lot of all-nighters usually resulting in too much coffee, not enough food and then dry heaves for breakfast."

The first version Berwick cut together attempted to send up not only the cannibalism concept but also its genre style and pacing. "I wanted to go so over the top, because it was so stupid," said look, let's break some rules, so I would keep Jackie walking from the sidewalk to the house to the garage and I would deliberately keep the camera on him so it went on and on until people would just think 'Oh my God—like when he was loading the meat into the refrigerator. I made that go on forever! But it was probably a wise decision to cut out all that stuff, and instead we went back and shot more nudity and more gore."

So, a fun-filled experience from start to finish. Nearly 30 years later, Berwick had already enjoyed the filmmaking process and he thoroughly enjoyed the idea of being a movie director. It was just a flat-out rush into distribution. Nobody wanted it, I mean, can you blame them? Very few people got it. They weren't ready for it. Is it supposed to be gory, is supposed to be funny? I remember we were screening it for a distributor one time, and by this time I couldn't watch the film anymore, so I was sitting in the lobby. Turns out the distributor left through the back exit and when the film was over, out walks Timothy Leary with an entourage of freaks.

He loved it! To this day, I have no idea what they were doing there. Anyway, we went back and re-shot some scenes, added some more gratuitous nudity and it was picked up. I don't know which version you've seen. If it's the one distributed by Rhino, that's the softer version. The other one was released by Midnight Video, we went back and re-shot some stuff and cut out some of the slower stuff and that had a picture of Jackie looking in at May in the microwave, drooling." (The British video release from Astra is the stronger version)

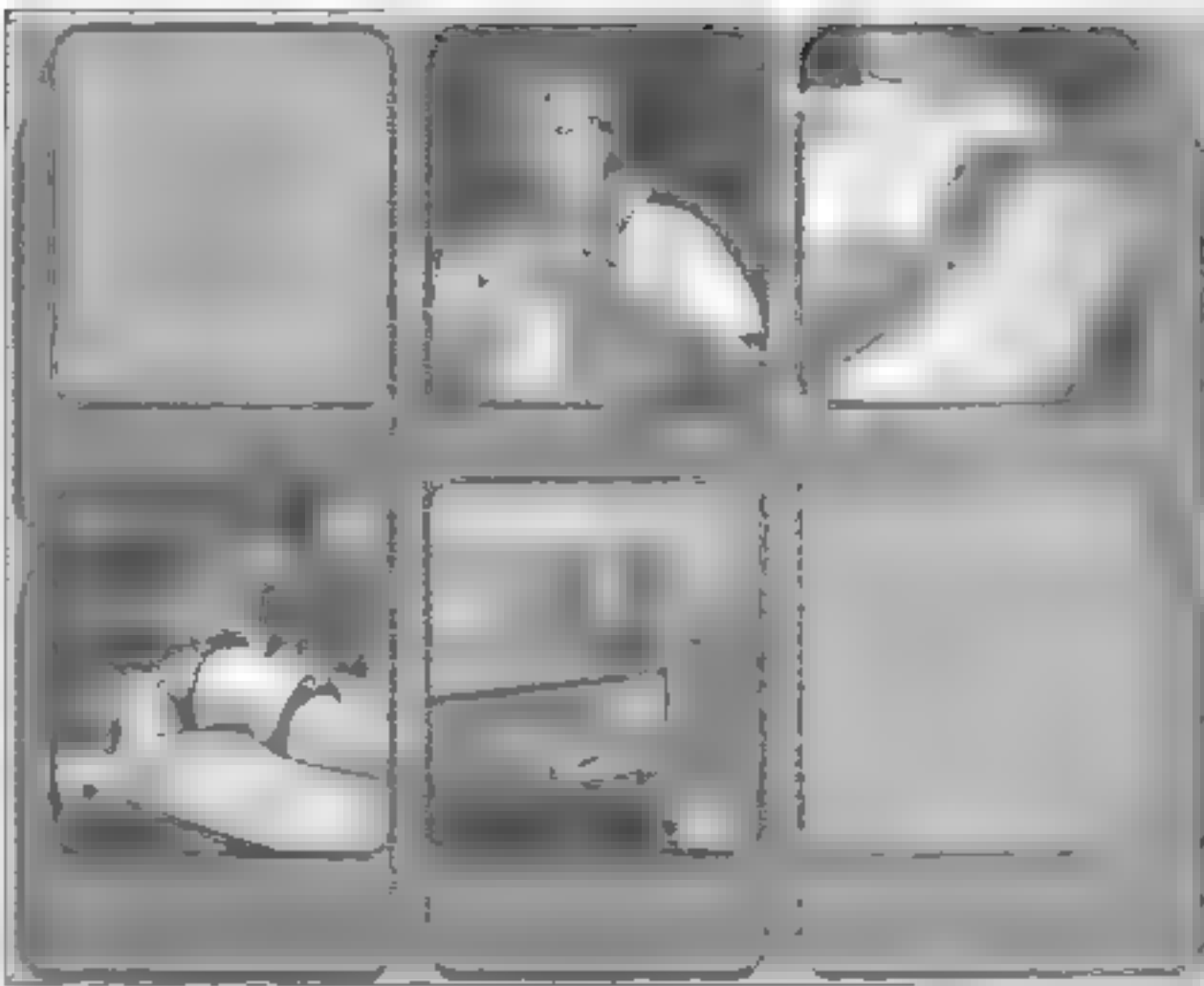
It was Berwick's misfortune to have directed an irreverent gore comedy three years before the smash success of a film like *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) popularised the format. For nearly five years the film sat on the shelf, unloved. Later, Berwick says, "People were comparing it to *Eating Raids*." I asked him if there had been much of an influence from comedy skit packages like *The Kentucky Fried Movie*. "I'm sure that's where Tom Singer was coming from, and I had to sort of settle into that and accept it. John Landis was an influence because of that film, and a lot of it came from stuff like the Corman picture, *The Little Shop of Horrors*. A very creepy comedy, that's what we originally had in mind, where you'd be laughing at something but you'd see someone up with actual fear. I was always into the 'Sam Raimi stuff', *Evil Dead*, the stuff that had a sense of humour. Although the thing that turned me on to horror was when I was a kid and I saw Peter Lorre in *The Beast with Five Fingers*. That movie just freaked me out! The severed hand, the whole atmosphere of that movie. I was always wondering, 'How do you get people scared like that?'"

Ted Newsom was not directly involved in *Microwave Massacre*, but he figured in the film's journey to video. He adds these observations about the movie: "I just rewatched that, and it's not as awful as it ought to be. It's a \$70-80,000 budget, with ten or twenty grand going into Vernon's pocket. They had nothing but problems with the distributors. It did actually play in theatres, released on tape by Select-a-Tape and I later sold it to Rhino for re-release. I had nothing to do with the making of *Microwave*; nobody asked, although I lived less than a mile away. I've always been miffed they didn't at least ask me to come work on the crew for free! Later on I got my revenge, selling it to Rhino and at least taking a small commission, so I probably made more than I would have at twenty dollars a day on the crew. I did do a photo shoot for a little bit in *Out* magazine (a girl with an apple in her mouth, carrot slices on her nipples and parsley on her bush, being loaded into the giant prop microwave like a loaf of French bread) and I got it a nice little three-page blurb published in *Famous Monsters*."

After-Dinner

Newsom and Berwick remained friends, and in 1985 they began working together on Berwick's second and so far last directorial credit *The Naked Monster*, known for several years in its unfinished state as *Attack of the B-Movie Monster*. "Wayne directed, I wrote and produced," says Newsom. "In the cast are the late John Harmon, Les Tremayne, and Jeanne Carmen. And a lighthouse. My little up of the hat to *Piedras Blancas*."

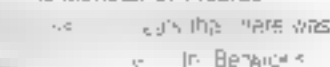
Filmed in Super-8, with the idea of reshooting later in 16mm or 35mm, *Attack* was, Berwick readily admits, more Ted Newsom's baby than his own: "He was the fifties



monster movie freak, I just happened to have the connection to *Monster of Piedras Blancas* and, really, enjoyed monster movies, but I didn't know who these people were as much as Ted." To begin with, Berwick and Newsom shot initial footage with John Harmon. It proved to be a fortunate decision, because Harmon died soon afterwards. His appearance in *The Naked Monster*, a film dedicated to the heyday of American monster movies, is a lovely coda to a career spanning half a century. After sponsoring the involvement of iconic actors Kenneth Tobey and Robert Cornthwaite (*The Thing*), John Agar (*The Mole People*), Robert Clarke (*The Huerfano San Demon*), Les Tremayne (*The War of the Worlds*) and Gloria Talbott (*The Daughter of Dr. Jekyll*), Newsom then sourced a selection of soundtrack cues from the Perma Music Library to give the movie an authentic period flavour. "Ronald Stein was the composer," he says. "I was involved in the Perma company with his widow Harlene. It's the same music that was tracked into A & P pictures like the Buchanan stuff, *The E. Creatures*, *Zontar the Thinker from Venus*, from even earlier things like *The Terror* and *Attack of the 5½ Foot Woman*." Added to these classic music cues are about ten minutes of footage drawn from old movies, which when combined with the new footage create an affectionate spoof that echoes some of the strategies of the Steve Martin comedy *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*. Thanks to a starry cast drawn from the height of the post-war monster movie craze, some of whom reprise their former roles, and a scatter-shot *Airplane!*-style humour tinged with welcome doses of irony, *The Naked Monster* is a genuinely inventive piece of home-broadcast. It was finally completed in 2005, credited to Newsom and Berwick as co-directors, and is now available on DVD. Let's hope that one day a future Ted Newsom or Wayne Berwick will do the same for the much-loved B-movie stars of seventies horror.

(One project that might have brought both Newsom and Berwick to renewed prominence in the horror genre

Microwave Massacre
1985



Berwick's only other screen directing credit is a short film called *The Shooter*, made right after *Naked Monster's* first shoot, in 1986. "It got a lot of cable play," Berwick says. "It was a featurette showcase about a crapshooter that played in the early days of Pay TV." Today, though, when Berwick is a musician first and foremost, and he's quite clear that he would only be interested in returning to the film industry if it were, as he puts it, "a movie about me."

[illegible]

- 3 Barwick receives an associate producer credit only
 - 4 Newsum is referring to Steckler's *The Hollywood Sign*. He meets the *Skidrow Slasher* and his judgement is, if anything, too lenient
 - 5 The *Greenerys of Malibu High* aka *Young Warriors* made in 1983
 - 6 Probably *The 4th Stage of Sinbad*, 1958
- Karen Crossman, who shot *The Slaver* in 1982



Mind Before Matter

Robert Allen Schnitzer on *The Premonition*

The Premonition (1975)

Strange, complex and haunting, in the Val Lewton tradition
The Austin Film Encyclopedia: Horror

Though some of the film is clumsy and amateurish, Robert Allen Schnitzer [] creates a genuinely eerie spell.
Archie

Little Jamie Bennett (Danielle Brisebois) lives happily with her adoptive parents, Sheri (Sharon Farrell), a painter, and Miles (Edward Bell), a college professor. She has no knowledge of her real mother, Andrea Fletcher (Ellen Barber), who has until recently been incarcerated in a mental institution. Now free, Andrea is scouring the area looking for Jamie, with the help of Jude (Richard Lynch), a circus employee whom she met while he too was under psychiatric supervision. When Jamie visits the circus with her parents, Andrea and Jude spot her and hatch a plan to snatch the girl from her bedroom and take her with them to live in a broken-down house in the country. Andrea gains entry to the Bennett's house and enters Jamie's bedroom. However, due to her mental instability, she ends up fleeing with only a doll. At the abandoned house, Andrea sinks into fantasy, until Jude can take no more.

When Andrea's dead body is recovered from a lake to which Sheri guides the police after seeing it in a vision, it would seem to have passed. And yet Andrea is still reaching out for Jamie, some force that transcends death. Sheri sees terrifying visions, and after a supernatural attack on her car sends it careening off the road, she wakes in hospital to be told that her daughter has disappeared from the crash site. Desperate for help, Sheri turns to Miles's colleague, Jeana Kingsley (Lithra Lee), a parapsychologist. Her research helps Sheri connect the dots between the Miles rebellion.

Overcomes his scepticism, a most unusual plan is hatched to draw Jamie back to her loving parents.

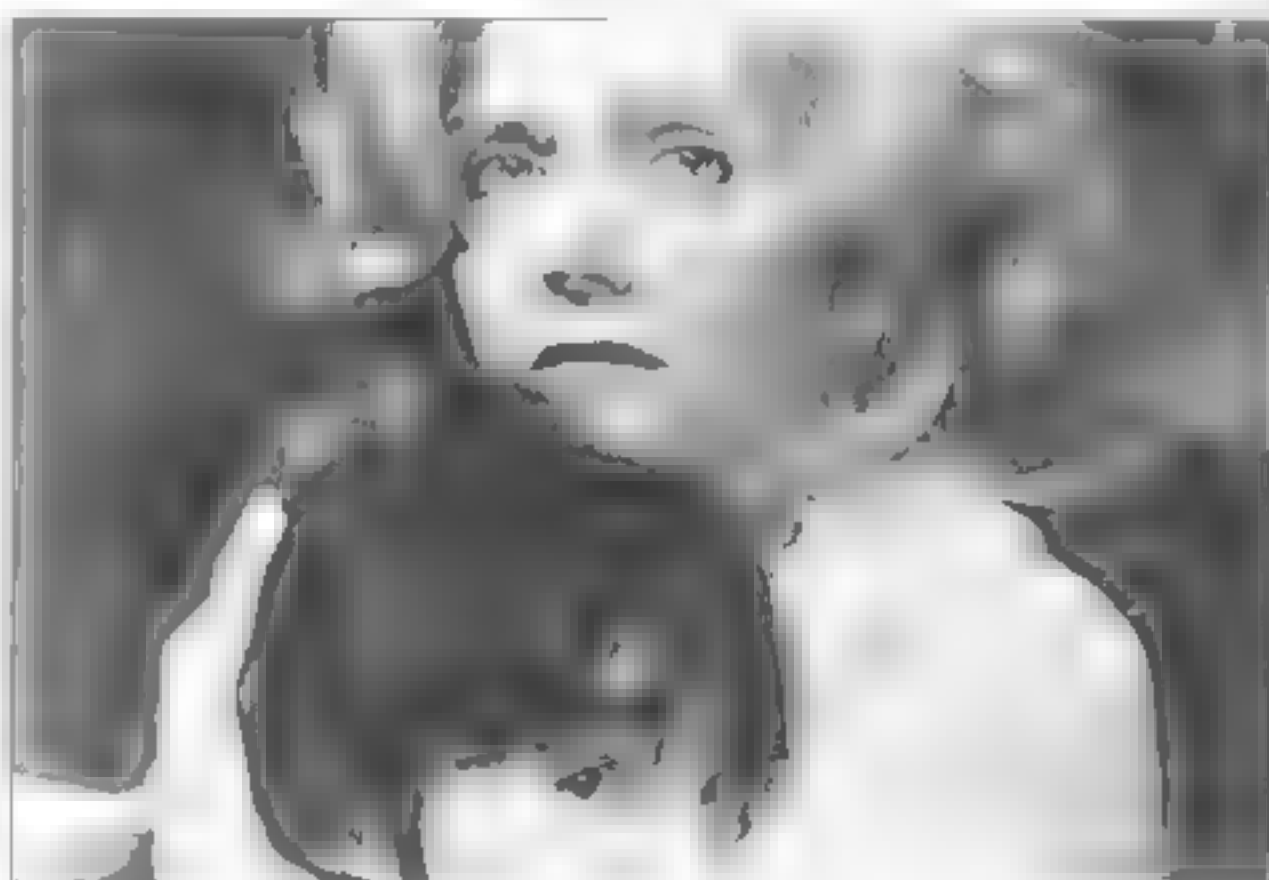
This bold and imaginative movie comes out of left field, with a tone and ambition that sets it apart from the norm. The story of an unbalanced mother trying to take back her daughter from the couple who adopted her is hardly a hackneyed plot for a horror tale, and to make things even stranger, Robert Allen Schnitzer—who wrote as well as directed—gracefully adds telepathy and precognition, a topic one would normally encounter in a

rationalist context. The acting is strong and assured, especially from Barber and Lynch, and Schnitzer's directing builds up some powerful suspense, dotted with genuinely startling shock moments.

The tale is told in a non-linear way, with information patched together piece by piece, and not always in a way that makes immediate sense. The viewer has to work to understand what's going on, and certain ambiguities are left to float for a while as other strands of the story dominate. All of which adds up to a highly individual effort from Schnitzer, the quality of which makes you sorry that he never returned to the genre. If his ambition had outstripped his ability, this would have been something of a mess, but he brings skill and sensitivity to the storytelling, a firm hand to the technical aspects, and a clear aptitude for working with actors. Whatever your feelings about the parapsychological concepts Schnitzer raises, there's no doubting his sincerity and his genuine imaginative involvement.

In the hands of a more conservative director, the tale would concern a nice adoptive family being threatened by a psychotic blood relative, you can imagine what kind of a mess Adrian Lyne would make of it. Instead, Schnitzer

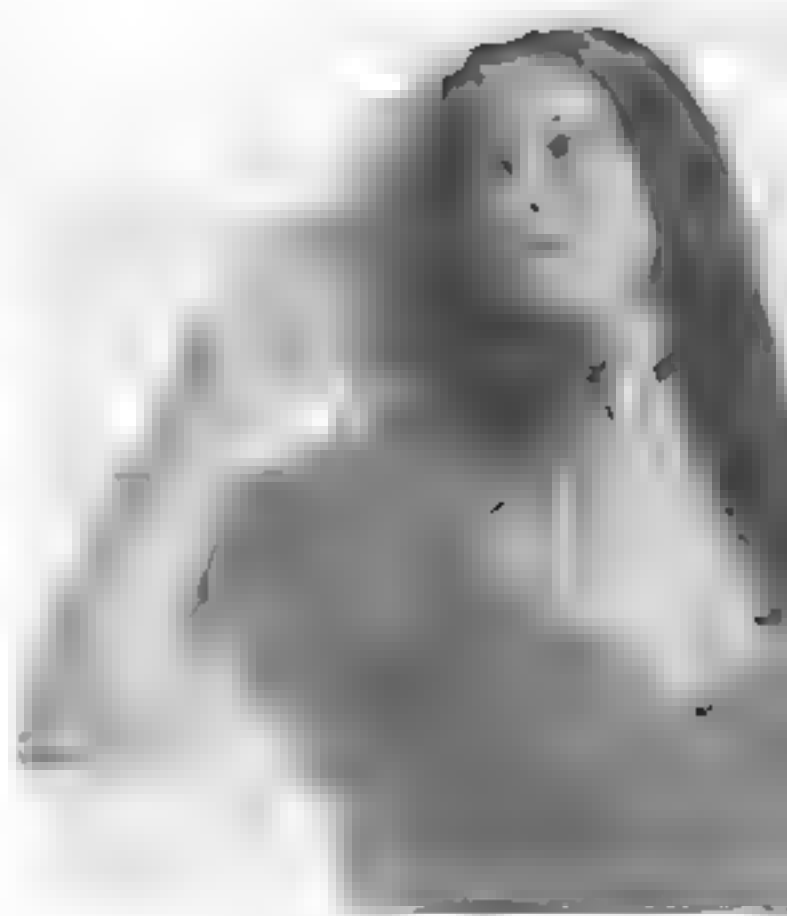
Sheri (Sharon Farrell)
 Jamie (Danielle Brisebois)
The Premonition (Brisebois)
 Horror genre
 the Darkside area
 5/10/2005



gives Andrea and Jude first bit of the creepy, making them into protagonists deserving of our interest and concern before going on to reveal what they're doing. The truth takes some time to emerge, and in that time we're allowed to imagine that they are perhaps simply devoted, if unconventional, parents of a missing daughter. The result of this strategy is that we cannot simply look upon Andrea and Jude as monsters. At times, the tacit, neurotic Andrea and unimpressed, ticking-tomb Jude are more sympathetic and compelling than the cosy but somewhat complacent family they're stalking. They are certainly terrifying at times, but we're always encouraged to view them with compassion. Schnitzer uses camera style to contrast the two couples: dialogue sequences between Andrea and Jude are filmed hand-held, conveying nervousness and urgency, while similar two-header shots of the Bennetts are more stable and restrained.

Schnitzer's film is about the bond of motherhood, to which even some sceptics are willing to attribute a quasi-mystical quality. Sheri's psychic sensitivity and Andrea's supernatural bond with her daughter are examples of extreme motherhood – and the battle that takes place for the child is all the more striking for its lack of conventional aggression. There's a creepy scene early on at Jamie's school, when Andrea watches through the school fence and tries, unsuccessfully, to speak to her estranged daughter. The camera moves from a shot of Andrea's fingertips poking through the wire fence, to a diagonal angle revealing Andrea in her entirety, peering through. It's an uncanny effect, emphasising her desperation, and her desire to transgress barriers – including ultimately that of death (herself). Sheri sees this strange, agitated woman and without knowing why, feels unsettled. Perhaps she has had some prior knowledge of Andrea – a photo in a case file glimpsed at the adoption agency, for instance – but the film wastes little time breeding such doubts, dispensing with ambivalence about the paranormal fairly early on. It's clear that Sheri's heightened instinct goes beyond the realm of conventional psychology.

In a film with many great sequences, perhaps most powerful is the one in which Andrea, wearing heavy make-up and a red evening gown, enters the Bennett house and sneaks into Jamie's bedroom. It's more than just creepy; it's a first-class piece of cinema. Schnitzer plays it quietly without grandstanding, but tension is powerfully conveyed by the lighting, camera and acting. Because we've begun to understand just how unhinged Andrea is, the suspense is naturally linked to fears for the child. The fact that everything seems to go right for Andrea, as she slips into the house and past the sleeping Sheri, endows her with a kind of god-like invincibility – interestingly, many killers have referred to this sensation, of being propelled smoothly along on the wings of fortune. But Andrea, who is not a killer, is undone by the perfection of what she sees – the little girl asleep in her bed. Instead of taking Jamie away, she lingers, cradling the sleepy child in her arms, sitting there in the dark, soaking up this brief spell of happiness. It's a terribly sad and eerie moment. Downstairs, Sheri wakes, and hearing an unaccustomed creaking from Jamie's room, goes upstairs to find Andrea in the child's rocking chair, cradling the sleeping Jamie. After a brief, resonant silence, the two women fight, and this is where the under is at last allowed to burn. After shrieks and wild reactions from both women, Andrea runs out of the house without Jamie, taking only a doll.



It's an electrifying scene that draws on childhood fears (someone sneaking into your bedroom to abduct you), parental fears (failing to protect your child in the family home), and the far-from-fanciful fantasies of displaced mothers (being an outsider in your child's life). Schnitzer ultimately favours the adoptive parents, but this is a story where sympathy is open to all characters. Far from being a conservative fantasy about responsible parents versus 'irrational' or 'crazy' parents, *The Premonition* demands nothing less than mind-expansion from the 'good' family. In a sense, the nice, intelligent Bennetts must meet a wounded, obsessive Andrea half-way. Miles is required to expand his rationalist understanding of the universe and embrace a new cosmological paradigm, and Sheri must engage with artistic creation far in excess of her own (rather mundane) painterly talents. The only painting by Sheri that we see, close up, is a portrait of her daughter. It's blue and open and feminine but it lacks edge, something Andrea certainly has (judging by the agile, modernist music she writes, and her difficult relationship with Jude). If Sheri wants her daughter back, she must match the passionate, complex Andrea; she must in some way enter Andrea's world. The fact that she does so – in an ambiguous ending – is Sheri so fully possessed by a 'won't' – or even more intriguing, perhaps Andrea and Sheri have fused psychically, with Sheri providing the stability and Andrea the creativity? If so, *The Premonition* becomes an imaginative, unorthodox wish-fulfilment fantasy in which the writer constructs his ideal mother – a woman both nurturing and challenging.

Richard Lynch, a sorely underused actor, is fantastic in the role of Jude. He brings a concentrated, unhistrionic danger to the role, and he's truly terrifying when he explodes. Schnitzer gives him a great intro scene: on a wet overcast afternoon, among the caravans of a rundown circus closed to the public, we see him, unsmiling, doing dance exercises outside his caravan. As he dances he looks into the camera, while the music summons echoes of vaudeville long ago. Later we see him plying his trade as a mime: the accompanying circus tunes have a whimsical but

knowing quality redolent of the Beatles song 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer' or George Harrison's strident 'Dark Horse' 'Piggies'. Twice during the film, Jude loses control, and Lynch's performance makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. He summons a pressurized, resonant tone from deep in his chest, one that sounds virtually electronic (think Tim Hunkley circa *Starfighter*). It will haunt you long after the film is over. The city ascends like a nuclear warning, from inhuman oscillation to frenzied shriek. Jude is the only killer here, and normally he'd be the villain, pure and simple. Instead, even he is shown with love. Indeed, love is what motivates him. He adores Andrea so much that he donates his every waking moment to her obsession. He only snaps when Andrea settles for less. Clutching a mere doll, she sinks into her delusion, and Jude, having staked all on their joint venture, is left high and dry: a psychotic who's bet his heart and lost. Richard Lynch is the sort of actor that David Lynch ought to seek out, and after seeing *The Premonition* I found it hard to watch him in less demanding roles (e.g. *Delta Fox* or *Deathsport*): in their mundanity they seem disrespectful.

The Premonition would have played very well in an all-night programme with *Don't Look Now* and *The Brood*, two other great films concerned with parapsychology, metaphysics, and the nature of the bond between parent and child. Like *Don't Look Now*, the focus of attention here is a 'missing' girl (in this a case a living one), whose parents have to come to terms with a new vision of the universe if they want to be reunited. When Andrea is pulled from the lake in her red dress (a striking and melancholic image) the *Don't Look Now* echoes are undeniable. Likewise, although *The Premonition* may have been shot in Mississippi, the locations have the chilly bleakness of early Cronenberg, and as in *The Brood*, the expressive psychosis of a possessive mother is contrasted with a decent, but slightly bland (and in this case adoptive) father. Miles, a lecturer on cosmology, is a sceptic when it comes to metaphysics. Ironically, during Shem's diagnostic session with Jeena, Miles is lecturing to his students on black holes and the structure of spacetime – that is, a branch of theoretical physics which throws up unstable hypotheses just as bizarre as the paranormal ideas Jeena is expressing. Less subtly, Schnitzer uses conversations between Miles and Jeena to shockhorn in some theoretical musings from the fringes of philosophy and Eastern religion: for instance, Miles says: 'So what you're saying is that consciousness is more primordial than matter.' Meanwhile, Jeena sets up the bizarre developments of the last reel by commenting:

The clairvoyant reality is totally rejected by science and finds expression only in art, music and religion.

In the name of surprise, it's best to draw a veil over the latter stages of the film – suffice to say there's a commitment to the poetic and illogical that would scarcely disgrace Dario Argento in his prime. That's not to suggest, there's a motherlode of violence in the final reel, far from it, but there is a suitably heroic disregard for narrative plausibility. *The Premonition* may be just a little too restrained for most fans of modern horror, and perhaps Schnitzer incorporates his metaphysical interests a shade too earnestly in the dialogue at times, but there's a great deal to admire in this impressively unformulate sleeper. In his ambition, imagination, and the power to anger in your thoughts, and like *William Shatner's Shock Survival* or *Warren Beatty's Messiah of Evil*, deserves a far greater release than it is.

Mad Before Matter



Robert Schnitzer, the Chairman and C.E.O. of California's New Age-oriented Oasis TV, was surprised when I called him up to discuss his 1975 horror movie *The Premonition*: 'I thought, in the age of *The Matrix* and *X-Men* it would be part of the movie graveyard,' he laughs. 'It's easy to see how he could have formed this impression, since *The Premonition* has not really been accorded much attention or admiration in cult film circles, despite it being, in my opinion, an unusual, intriguing and well-made horror tale, with few obvious similarities to other films of the day. Stylistically it's like a more mystic-friendly neighbour to the films of David Cronenberg, plot specifics different of course but the off-centre conception, with ideas hovering between science-fiction, horror and metaphysics, has a similar maverick sensibility throughout.'

Robert Allen Schnitzer was born in New York City in 1950. He started making films at his high school, which was located on the border of Greenwich Village. It was the mid-sixties, and New York was humming with cultural activity. Schnitzer took a lively interest in the underground film scene, attending screenings by Warhol and Kenneth Anger. 'I was really interested in what they were doing in film and I just picked up a camera when I was about seventeen, my father bought a Bolex 16mm at a junk shop. I called up a friend of mine who was a still photographer and said, 'Do you know anything about making movies?' He said no, so I said, 'Well, I want to bring this thing over to you, let's learn how to use it and start making movies.' So, after school and at weekends I would start making these – I guess you would call them experimental, 16mm films. We shot them on the streets of New York.



Andrea (Ellen Barber) savours the air of the derelict ghetto to which she and her father have fled.

opposite page top: *The Premonition* video cover

opposite page left: *The Premonition* video cover

Disturbed circus name Jude (Richard Lynch) is questioned about James' possible return.





THE PREMONITION
Don't Argue to a Premonition



75/277

is a drag fantasy after her failure to
 2. 3. 4. 5.

Schnitzer's first film was "an impressionistic love story called *Hermit Equinox* - a forty-minute 16mm piece which he wrote, produced and directed in 1967. It was screened at the famed Bleecker Street Theater in New York City, home of the avant-garde and host to the likes of Andy Warhol, Paul Morrissey, Jonas Mekas and Jack Smith. There was more excitement to come. Schnitzer was surprised and delighted when he received an invitation to enter the film at the Mannheim Film Festival in Germany. A week later the award arrived through the post - Schnitzer's spirits were boosted and his film career was off to a good start. "That really got my attention! I thought wow, my first film won an award in Europe! So I went to college, which had no film program, and I started the first filmmaking club there. We made films on campus, there was no teacher showing us how to do it, but having made films in high school I knew what to do."

Schnitzer directed two more projects at college: "I made a picture called *Terminal Point* in 1969, which was about an hour long, shot in black and white, about a student who starts to disintegrate mentally and has a series of psychotic and hallucinogenic experiences. About six years ago I dug up those reels of film and had them cleaned and rejuvenated and put into a temperature and humidity controlled facility. Unfortunately I never transferred them to video. I also did a short documentary called *A Rumbling in the Land*, about the anti-war movement, also in 1969."

Schnitzer's opposition to the war in Vietnam was further expressed by a series of thirty-second anti-war commercials which played at the prestigious Walter Reade cinema chain in Manhattan.¹ The clips were shown before the main film, as Schnitzer explains, "I gave them 35mm prints and they stuck them on like a trailer to their movies, so for about a month these four thirty-second commercials were being shown at Manhattan movie theatres."

Schnitzer's friend James Brian in California, Schnitzer identified with the substance of the hippie revolt of the mid-1960s: "I guess I was a hippie, so to speak - I never thought

about myself as such, but as time went on and I look back, I think well yes, I wore the beads and the jeans, I went on the marches. I felt that war was already obsolete and that there was a better way. Around that time I also got involved in what would now be called the 'New Age' movement; I felt that this thing we call reality is a mindset and that there are other levels and other realities and other universes existing at the same time, and that everything is a function of consciousness, and so I became increasingly frustrated with going to college. Initially I lived on campus making these films, but I found myself going into Manhattan more and more, until ultimately I dropped out in the early seventies to make what became my first feature film, *Rebel*, which was a reflection of where I was at the time."

Rebel, made in 1972, is the story of an anti-war activist called Jerry Savage (Sylvester Stallone) who falls in love with a flower child, Laurie Fisher (Rebecca Grimes). She feels that the only answer to war is love, whilst he favours direct violent action. After trying and failing to see Laurie's point of view, Jerry joins a cell of the terrorist group The Weathermen, who are planning to blow up a New York skyscraper. However, unbeknownst to him, an undercover FBI agent is about to spoil the bombers' fun. A film exposition of the dilemma expressed in John Lennon's Beatles song 'Revolution 1': "But when you talk about destruction/Don't you know you can count me out (top)," it was made just before Stallone starred in *The Lords of Flatbush* (1974).² Schnitzer recalls: "It was his first starring role. He was one of about four hundred people we interviewed. I made that film - it was originally called *No Place to Hide* - in 1972, then, because it took a while to finish, we ran out of money and it stayed in my refrigerator for a year while I raised the finishing money. Finally in 1975, when *Rocky* was about to come out, I thought gee well instead of *No Place to Hide* why don't we call it *Rebel*? You know, to reflect the individual star more. Then *Rebel* was able to get distributed and sold."

Making *The Premonition*

Schnitzer's next film, *The Premonition* (1975), marks a shift from the political to the personal, being concerned primarily with the mystery of human consciousness. A strange and unsettling tale, it seems to spring partly from the arguments of Laurie in *Rebel*, who is more concerned with persuading Jerry to examine his aura than in helping him blow up a corrupt capitalist system. Schnitzer was deeply affected by the work of Timothy Leary, the ex-Harvard professor whose adoration of the LSD experience led him to become both a political radical and a believer in dropping out of the system to pursue spiritual enlightenment. *The Premonition* turns away from politics to explore family identity, the spirit world, and psychic sensitivity.

Just as he had done with *Rebel*, Schnitzer raised the money for *The Premonition* independently. However, this time there was greater security than usual for an independent production, thanks to Avco Embassy Pictures, who entered into a distribution deal with Schnitzer just before the film was shot, after seeing the script and budget proposal. *The Premonition* was to be a non-union film, something that Avco Embassy could not be seen to condone. Therefore the film was not taken onboard as part of their production slate, but rather was bought as a finished negative after the completion of the film - a deal known in the industry as a 'negative pickup'. Avco guaranteed a distribution and

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promotion budget of \$500,000, as long as the film stuck reasonably to the proposal, and so Schnitzer was able to shoot knowing that as long as he kept the film on the right track, a well-supported national release was assured.

He decided to shoot in the state of Mississippi, where local authorities had a generous attitude toward visiting film crews. Mississippi came out on top because hotel accommodation was cheap, the fire department provided their fire buses for ruin scenes, sales taxes were waived, and location clearance was easy to obtain. "Mississippi was also what was called a 'right to work' state," adds Schnitzer, "and on our budget there was no way we could have shot it with a union crew, so we were able to bring non-union people down there and legally work on the film without having to pay overtime and weekends and so forth."

So what drew Schnitzer to the subject of the movie? "I was a definite outgrowth of my interest in the paranormal. Anthony Mahon came to me with a script named *The Adaptation*. I read that and the psychic elements resonated with me, so with Mahon I went through the usual dozen rewrites. Then Louis Pastore did what's called additional dialogue, so the script was about ninety percent done. The contributions were probably forty-five percent Mahon, forty percent me, and ten percent Louis Pastore. He did the polish. The tale when we were shooting was *Turtle Heaven* during the kidnapping attempt there's a fight and the child's pet turtle dies. They bury the turtle and the little girl says 'Is there a heaven for turtles?' and the foster mother says 'There's a heaven for each of us.' But Avco Embassy thought that *Turtle Heaven* was not the ticket for the world. I've come to wish we kept that title because it's so much more unique, it creates a unique image as opposed to *The Premeditation* which is very abstract."

The Premeditation is constructed obliquely, so that we must constantly strive to piece together her clues and implications. "That's how it is in the psychic world," says Schnitzer. "Things are hinted at. I remember I wanted the movie to look like a dream. That was the idea. We kept a lot of the violence off-screen. I was a student of Greek theatre at the time and I liked the idea that things were kept off screen and in your imagination."

Prominent in the cast is Richard Lynch, an idiosyncratic actor who has been somewhat underappreciated, and understretched, although he worked like a demon throughout the seventies, eighties and nineties. Schnitzer agrees that Lynch has something special, although working with him was not without its difficulties. "Well, I've worked in Hollywood where the standard answer is always, 'Oh he was a pleasure to work with, he's a terrific actor and I'd work with him again.' In truth, he was a great actor, but he was going through an emotional period in his life so we had to work around that. There were rumours that he had set himself on fire. Never was able to get a straight answer from him on that. There were rumours he did it as a protest against the war, that he just went nuts and did it to himself, but I learned on *Rebel* that a director sometimes has to be very tough and not take gruff from actors, and so there were times, being a sensitive actor which he was, that I would have to lay down the law and give him very strong direction. But that comes with the territory. Actors are artists and artists are temperamental. It took a toll on me though."

Editing and post-production were conducted back in New York. Avco Embassy made good on their guarantee to spend half a million dollars on distribution, prints and

advertising. The agreement was for the movie to open in at least ten cities, from a list including the major population centres, like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Schnitzer lent his hand to the pump, taking part in promotional activity across the Mid-West. "Avco put me on the road to do publicity for the film around the country," he recalls.

That was fun. It went on for about three weeks, it was very enjoyable. I got the inside look on how a movie gets opened, the relationship between distribution and exhibition. I remember arriving in Des Moines, Iowa, and there was only one film company in the city and that company was also the funeral parlor. All the funerals were taken and all they had was a hearse!

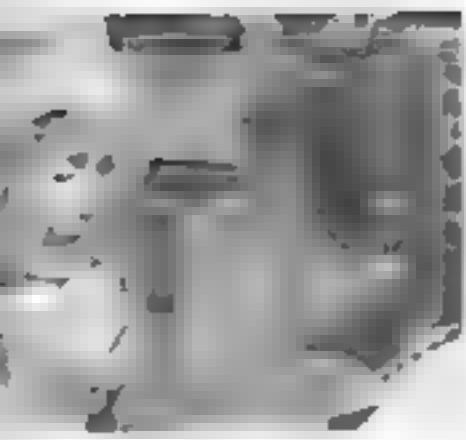
The Premeditation was a moderate success (making the *variety* top 50 films for a week or two), and so Schnitzer moved to Los Angeles to further his career. However, he soon discovered that having a successful movie in circulation was not in itself a guarantee of further opportunity.

"I guess you have an absolute blockbuster, it's like starting again from the beginning. Had I stayed in New York it might have worked out better because my reputation and contacts were there, and New York is itself a media centre, but I wanted to try something different and L.A. was the film capital of the world."

Hollywood, and Beyond

With the hoped-for follow-up movie deal proving elusive, Schnitzer moved across to television, taking an internship with Steven Bochco, soon-to-be producer of the classic *Hill Street Blues* series. It was 1976, and Bochco was working on a show for Universal called *Delvecchio*, a police drama starring Judd Hirsch and Charles Hallahan that some have seen as a precursor to *Hill Street Blues*. Schnitzer tracked the production, observing the first season with a view to working as director on the second. But the series was pulled and the job never materialised. "I had no real feelings about it anyway," Schnitzer says, "because it was so much like a victory, a totally different world. I saw up close the pressures that the producers had with the networks and the studio, having to answer to the management, the networks, television etc. When it fell through I decided to stick to things that had something of myself in them. I began a long period of developing properties, some written by me and others based on scripts by others." It was a fallow period in terms of screen credits, but the work was not without financial compensations. "That went on for nine years or so. The old joke was the producers with the fancier cars were the ones who never got films made, and the ones that had the old bangers clunking along are the ones who actually got movies made but didn't make any money on them!"

Schnitzer's experiences on his third feature film *Kandyland* (1986), were in stark contrast to the relaxed working experience he'd enjoyed on *The Premeditation*, and acutely at odds with the frothy, light-hearted slant of the material. The producers, Roger Corman's New World Pictures, were a constant thorn in the director's side, insisting on interfering and second-guessing, criticising and obstructing the embattled director. "I raised the money independently, and had a similar deal to *Premeditation*, this time with New World. Even though again this was a negative pickup, they were more involved, they showed up on the set and we did get more assistance from them," he pauses. "Yes, that's a euphemism! It was brutal, in fact. For about a week I was fighting for my job. They wanted a



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harder edge. I saw this as a love story set against a night club, with music and dance, and they saw it more as a sex film and wanted more nudity. I would get these three- or four-page memos every day, based on their watching the dailies. I was working twenty-two hours a day and instead of getting support from them I felt I was getting nothing but criticism. But I came through it, on budget and on schedule. It came out alright, a few more breasts than I was intending, but it was very well reviewed in the trade papers and the cities where it played."

Kanchana may have reached the screen alright, but Schnitzer found the experience so grueling and unpleasant that he hasn't produced or directed a movie since. "After *Kanchana* didn't want to direct anymore because the stress was just unbearable. I decided it wasn't worth it. After we finished shooting, for about a week when I woke up in the morning, instead of waking slowly and gradually my eyes would pop open with my heart beating rapidly. I would look at the time: it might be about eight in the morning, and I would jump up out of bed and run to the closet, and it would be two or three minutes before I realised, hang on, we're not shooting anymore, we wrapped. I'm not late. I don't have to be on the set at five or six."

For about six or seven years, Schnitzer acted as producer's representative, helping to package scripts. He made a good living, but felt unfulfilled at a deeper level. It all came to a head towards the end of 1996, leading to a major revision of his life and work. "Even when I made a deal on a project—and some deals did get made—I just wasn't fulfilled as a person. I wasn't enjoying my relationships in the Hollywood community. I had a lot of so-called friends in there but they were really just business relationships. So I sub-leased my office in Beverly Hills, except for one little room which I kept for myself. I let everybody go. I gave myself ninety days to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. I said I'm gonna be open to everything."

"I'll go back to school, I'll become a doctor, I'll become a farmer, anything. I wanted to finally give myself a chance to do anything and everything else that was out there. After thirty days it occurred to me that what I should do is combine my media experience with my personal interests. I started a cable TV network called Body-Mind-Spirit, which is the new phraseology for what used to be called New Age. At college, I had started getting interested in Eastern philosophy. I read the works of Alan Watts, Timothy Leary. I actually met someone I later found out was working for the government on campus at the time, doing research on mind-altering drugs, and I became an aficionado of that whole area. I took acid."

"I would have to say mindfully enough to find out what it was all about, then gave it up after that. An educational experience. I found out that reality as we know it is based on subjective consciousness. The thing that sustains life and this thing we call reality is love, and we are evolving creatures. I never joined any group or organisation, and never practised any one thing. In fact the very thing that people use to put down New Age ideas, dilettantism, so to speak, to me that's the strength of it. Ektism, think—that one path is better than another, leads to animosity and antagonism, and to what we see going on today with religious fundamentalism. Since I started Oasis TV, one of the most disappointing things I discovered was that once you get a guru of some sort, or join any exclusive thinking community, you're subject to the same nonsense that afflicts more orthodox mainstream religions."

With Buddhists, one sect is at war with another, and even in India, the very role model for Eastern spirituality, the Buddhists are killing the Hindus and the Hindus are killing the Buddhists. So I think the answer is this so-called dilettantism. Borrow, examine, and make your own mind up. Never sign up for anything. I feel weird signing up for anything list."

Hearing in mind that the New Age movement has frequently been criticised for wooliness and an inability to find a role for 'negatives', except to deny them or sweep them under the carpet, I suggest to Schnitzer that these antagonisms are hard-wired, an inescapable part of the human animal. "I definitely see there's a duality—you can't have light without dark. And I also realise that we're to a large extent members of the animal kingdom, and animals are sometimes aggressive when it comes to their own domain. But I think that's the beauty of spirituality and evolving consciousness, that we can move away from that."

Robert Schnitzer's arguments for the rejection of dogma carry more weight now than ever, even if Oasis TV's roiling menu of Tibetan healing, personal growth therapy, toddler's yoga lessons and David Icke can seem like a mystic's Tower of Babel. Schnitzer struck me as a decent and unpretentious man in our (admittedly brief) conversations; neither soft in the head nor nurturing some new intransigence under cover of a global consciousness. Macaulay. Although the long-term benefits of New Age dilettantism, if any, are yet to be seen, anyone who sets out to provide alternatives to the power of orthodox

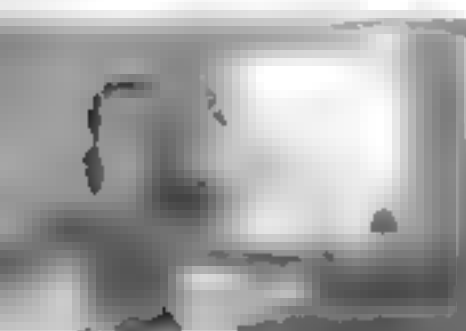
Premeditation with its story of the living reaching an understanding with the angry dead, there's a role for an exploration of humankind's dark corridors along the way.

1 The long established Walter Reade chain of cinemas was bought by Cineplex, allied to MCA/Universal, in 1986. The last remaining Walter Reade Cinema in New York is located in The Lincoln Center, and continues to represent the more experimental and diverse cinemas of the world.

2 Schnitzer "I'm a tremendous fan of John Lennon, I was in New York the day he died, and as soon as I heard what happened I dropped what I was doing and I went to The Dakota in the rain and joined the mourners there. He was a very unique soul on this planet."



Spinning vapours of Andrea begin after the



Spawn of Venice Beach

Stephen Traxler on *Slithis*

Spawn of the Slithis (1977)

When Connors, a journalism instructor living in Venice Beach, Los Angeles, visits a crime scene where a local couple have been murdered, and finds strange organic matter. He hands it on to a zoologist friend, Dr. John (J.C. Chair) who identifies it as a piece of marine exoskeleton mixed with 'Slithis', a protoplasmic substance discovered in the wake of a nuclear accident several years ago. Connors's girlfriend (Jeff (sic) Judy Motu sky) warns him not to mess with it, but he ignores her. On the night of another slaying of a local beach bum (Rocky Fumarel) he sees something come out of the sea. Connors speaks to the man, and approaches the police with his suspicions that some sort of marine creature is involved, but they're convinced the deaths are the work of a 'mutilation cult' and dismiss his findings. Connors strikes up a friendship with a local sailor, Chris Alexander (Melio Alexandria) and persuades him to take his boat out to sea to draw soil samples from the seabed. Connors and Dr. John also close off the canal from the incoming tide, thus blocking the Slithis creature's entry to the Venice Beach area. Instead the monster turns its attention to the nearby Marina del Rey, savagely killing a sleazy boat owner and his ingenue pick-up (Steven J. Hogg and Wendy Rastattur). An attempt to trap and kill the creature on land fails, and Connors heads off to sea with Alexander and his crew, where they must battle with the enraged mutation.

Traxler's affectionate pastiche of fifties monster movies was the industry calling card of Stephen Traxler, a director-turned-producer determined to make his mark via the horror genre. Complete with scientific gobbledygook about 'living mud' ("It is organic, there's no doubt about that, but it's also inorganic"), it transplants the man-in-a-rubber-suit likes of *The Monster of Pustas Blancas* into the seventies like a prehistoric fish found alive in modern waters. By having his creature stalk L.A.'s Venice Beach (an area best known for its bohemian community and cheap accommodation), Traxler benefits from an interesting, untypical backdrop, and though the movie maybe lacks the pace that would ensure a wider cult following he nevertheless conjures some pleasingly bloody moments. To cap it off, the

Slithis itself boasts one of the most charmingly ugly mugs of monsterdom—a vital consideration for such movies, which operate like beauty contests in reverse.

I'm not altogether fond of genre retro-itis, but Traxler spices things up with some gory wrestling between man and beast that would have had fifties kids choking on their popcorn. The 'explanation' for the creature's existence may have its roots in fifties atomic paranoia—a nuclear radiation spill—but when you consider the Three Mile Island incident happened just two years later, Traxler's is hardly anachronistic. And as well as its numerous fifties references, *Slithis* also borrows from *Jaws* as the leading man, in a Paul Michael Glaser woolly cargo can, takes to the waves with a salty old Jamaican seadog, Melio Alexandria, to catch a monster the authorities deny exists.

A detail, which is either hilarious or irritating, depending on your mood, is the way the monster sees the world through the neck of a bottle, and I don't mean he's a heavy drinker.

Hell Hath No Fun

Spawned?? The copywriter appears to have run out of ideas.

WARNING!

YOU MUST HAVE YOUR SURVIVAL KIT TO BE ADMITTED TO THEATRE. OBTAIN THEM FREE FROM CASHIER AT TIME YOU PURCHASE YOUR TICKET!



HELL HATH NO FUN... LIKE...

"SLITHIS"

MOVIE LAB
PG

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ALAN BLANCHARD • JUDY MOTUSKY • MELIO ALEXANDRA • OMNIS EEFART • WNN •
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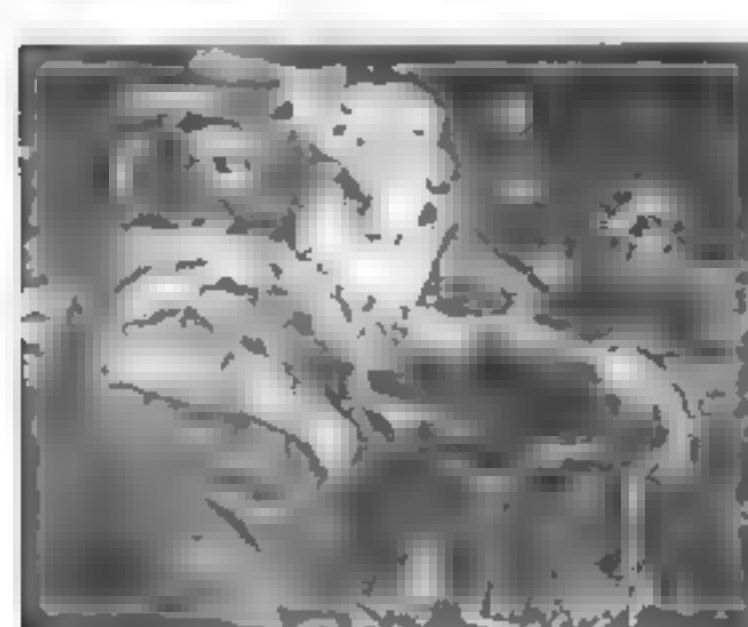


Someone decided it would suffice to attach what looks for all the world like a coke bottle to the camera lens for the monster's P.O.V. The film does at least nod to the audience regarding its own absurdity. (After hearing Dr. John's theory of the formation of complex life from irradiated silt, Connors says, "Oh sure - by combining organic matter, a little bit of bacteria and substituting the pressure of a million years of environmental change with a dose of radioactivity.") There is also a brief dip into the transient population of a run-down Venice Beach that anticipates Traxler's only other directorial credit, *San Chur Just: Search for a Homeless Man* (1999).

On the downside, the film is hampered by too many of its characters. The main character, a Vietnam veteran, his way with dialogue has an 'untranslated TV pilot' quality that eludes your attention. He and his similarly unimpressive girlfriend, played by Judy Motulsky, squash the fun out of their scenes together. *Slithis* spends too much time indoors with these two, and given the 'PG' level production, there's nothing doing in the bedroom either. Their drawn-out conversations have no other function than to pad the running time between glimpses of the monster. It's left to the supporting cast, especially the likeable Alexandria, to try and lift the energy levels, although Alejandro Voss as the Police Chief perhaps goes a bit too far in the opposite direction, turning in an eye-rolling caricature that even *Police Academy* fans would find a touch broad.

Spawn of the Slithis was made by a Vietnam veteran who fought through some of the most violent days of the conflict, which perhaps explains why he chose to focus on the gentler 'horrors' of a bygone era, drawing on the cinema of his childhood rather than the contemporary horrors of say, Bob Clark's *Deathdream*. Not every ex-soldier is going to want to revisit their worst memories on film, despite Tom Savini's example. (Savini, who'd been a combat photographer in Vietnam, built a career as arguably the foremost purveyor of realistic grue in the business.) Nevertheless, without wanting to overburden the film - perhaps it's a chance between Panchard's white-bread hero and Alexandria's black sailor (not a typical plot development in lies monster movies) reflects the way friendships developed between black and white soldiers in the pressure-cooker of Vietnam warfare.

Spawn of the Slithis may not be the most sophisticated film in this book, but it went down a treat with kids at the time, and inspired a much-loved promotional campaign that probably wedged itself in the audience's minds as much as the movie itself, as Traxler now recalls.



Stephen Traxler was born in San Francisco in December 1945 and raised, from the age of four, in the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles. His first brush with the power of cinema came when he saw a re-issue of *The Wizard of Oz* with his grandmother. "Those damn monkeys scared the hell out of me," he laughs. "As a kid I went to the movies whenever possible. The local theatre had Saturday matinees that I attended religiously. Cartoons, comedies and all the sci-fi and horror films, including re-issues of forties serials." The Traxlers couldn't afford a film camera for their young movie fanatic, but they did have a Brownie (a simple, inexpensive still camera). "In our backyard I'd put together a set and place little action figures (army men, cavemen and dinosaurs, cowboys and Indians) in various positions, usually conflict of some kind, and find interesting angles to photograph the scene," Traxler remembers. "Ultimately I'd have a storyboard, although I didn't realise it at the time."

His career in the movie industry began while he was still in high school, when he got a role in a TV commercial. "A friend of mine was one of the original 'Mousketeers' - his mother liked me a great deal and helped me get into the business. When I left school I worked in films as an extra - also had an extremely short and undistinguished career as a Grip. I think it lasted three days at Paramount." Traxler's ambitions were ultimately to write, produce and direct his own work. "I always enjoyed writing as a kid," he explains. "I wrote my first screenplay when I was in my teens. It was a horror story having to do with native Americans, a shaman curse, an unscrupulous developer despoiling the land in a sacred place and a horrible creature summoned from the spirits. It sounds terribly cliche'd but it was way ahead of its time. We saw several of those done some years later."

These nascent ambitions were put on hold, however, when Traxler got drafted to serve in the infantry in Vietnam during the initial big build-up of February 1966. It was, by most accounts, the nastiest part of the war before the Tet Offensive in 1968. "I was trained as an airborne infantryman (did jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia) but was placed in a mechanized infantry unit once I arrived in country," Traxler recalls. "I served in 'B' Company of the 13th mechanized infantry of the 25th Infantry Division. We were located in Chu Chi and our area of operations included the Viet Cong strongholds of the Bo Lai Woods, the Ho Bo Woods and the Michelin Rubber Plantation, plus the Tay Ninh Province. This area was hot, hot, hot. I was a Forward Observer with a mortar platoon - this was a rather hairy position and volunteer only. I did a night ambush about every third night, when we were in the jungle - which was most of the time. I made the rank of Sgt. E-5, a three stripe if you're into old war movies. During my thirteen months in combat I received several Unit Citations, the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart and various medals for various reasons. Our unit saw a great deal of action but there was always a lot of hurry-up-and-wait, 20% terror and 80% boredom, as someone once said."

Traxler made it back home in one piece in November of 1967 and resumed his college studies, majoring in film and broadcasting. "After I graduated from college I moved to a beautiful ski area," he recalls. "Going from high school to

Vietnam to college. I needed a break. I spent several years there and at the close of one season was racing and broke my leg very severely. I moved back to L.A. and lived with a girlfriend on one of the canals in Venice, California. I was in a full leg cast for a year, so I had plenty of time to contemplate the area and its funky surroundings. It was then that I thought about doing a modern sci-fi/horror film with roots in the fifties radioactive monster genre. Kind of a creature from the green canal thing.

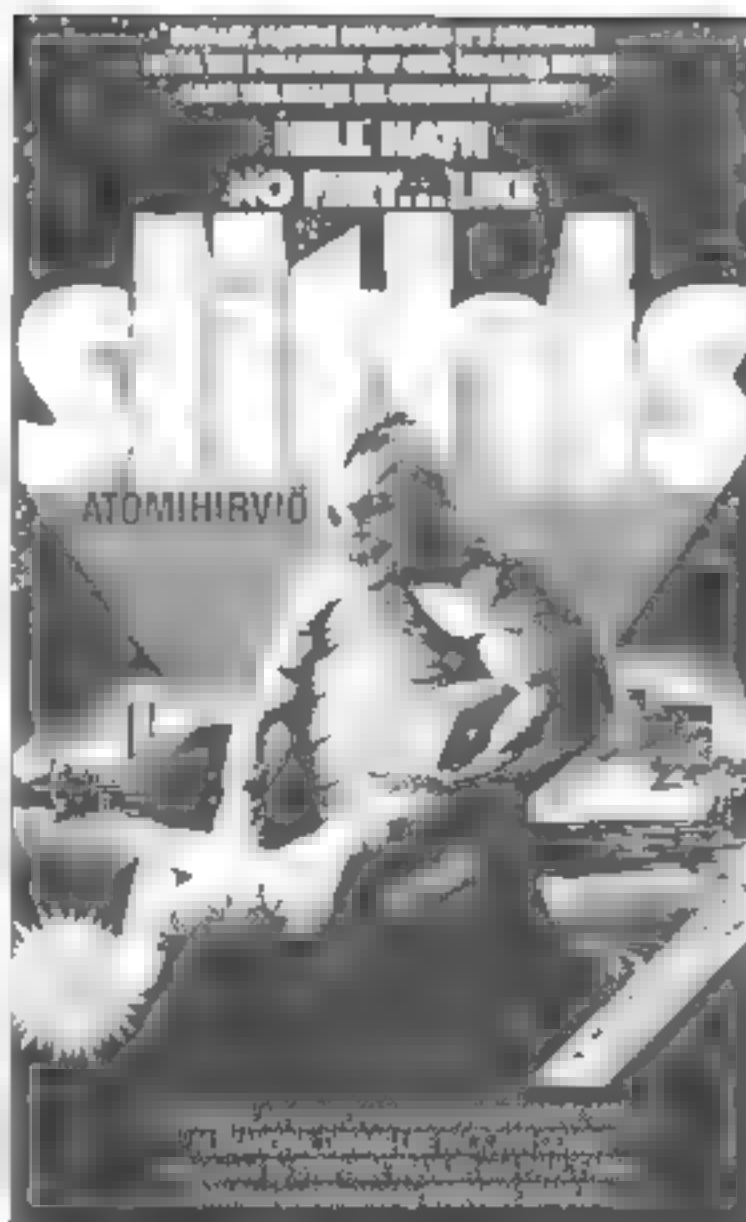
The Spawning of *Sithu*

Without a real apprenticeship or contacts in the film studios, Traxler knew that if he was to realize his dream of becoming a producer and director he would have to strike out on his own, as an independent. "I took my completed script to a friend, Paul Fabian, who also worked in the business, and suggested that we partner up," he recalls. Fabian agreed, and became co-producer and production manager on the film. "The key was to do the picture for a very low ball number, an amount that we might be able to secure ourselves from private money. We came up with \$50,000, then we worked backward with our budget to make the project fit that number. With a budget in hand along with a slide show of potential atmospheric locations, an illustration of the monster, etc., we started giving a series of presentations, looking for investors. The traditional dog and pony show. Southern California was undergoing a real estate boom at the time and a lot of young people, especially in Orange County, had some money to play with. We concentrated on that area and came up with four \$10,000 investors.

That still left sixty thousand dollars. Finally, against all advice, Traxler advertised in the *Daily Variety* and, much to his surprise, got a phone call. "In general, people who solicited investors in trade papers didn't have much luck," he explains. "The advice was to save your time and money, cause it ain't gonna happen. In my case, it did." The call was from an Iowa theatre exhibitor called Jack Davis who'd recently invested in a low-budget picture called *The Hazing* (aka *The Curious Case of the Campus Corpse*) directed by Douglas Curtis in 1977. "He'd read my ad and wanted to talk about the project," says Traxler. "We got together, along with a production manager he'd used on his last film. As Jack would have it, the production manager knew Robert Caramico, the director of photography I planned to use—the fastest cameraman in the business and the only one he felt could allow me to complete the picture in my twelve-day shooting schedule.

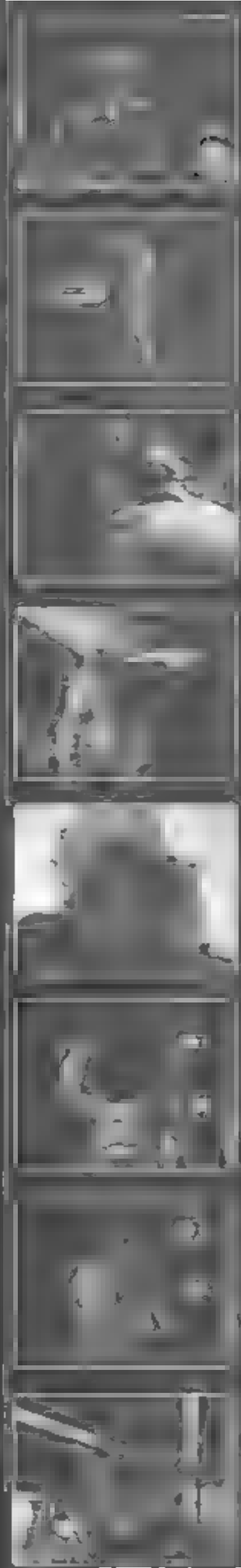
After some discussion, Davis agreed to chip in the other \$60,000. For this investment, however, he also wanted distribution rights. "I was desperate," Traxler admits, so he immediately agreed and we had a deal. Since our deals with the other investors were about to run out, we didn't have much choice. Also, since my partner and I owned 50% of the film and I personally owned remake and sequel rights, we felt we were adequately covered. We knew embarrassingly little about distribution; it was always a murky area. Quite intentionally kept that way, managed by the distributors.

Also involved, although not as an investor, was another Mid-West exhibitor called Bob Fridley—an occasional partner of Davis's. "Fridley owned a chain of theatres and was the quieter of the two," says Traxler, "whereas Davis was a smart man and often loud and obnoxious. He boasted



of his friendship with Mickey Rooney and apparently was a financial backer of a dinner show that Rooney started in. He used to laugh loudly and say, 'Let's be friends now, cause the fuckin' comes later.' Prophetic words for Paul Fabian myself and our other investors. Davis and his sons made some real money by owning a number of adult theatres in several Midwestern states. He catered to the farm folks in these rural areas and used to say his success could be judged by the number of pick-up trucks in the theatre parking lot. There were no Pussycat Theatres in these areas and this was before porn went directly to video. He also owned several drive-in theatres and later turned the large sites into shopping malls. Unfortunately for Bob Fridley, he had no money in *Sithu*. Davis said he gave him the opportunity but Bob declined to invest—I don't know this for a fact. I was later told by Davis that *The Hazing* was a financial failure and his and Fridley's investment was lost.

Traxler's cinematographer Robert Caramico was an experienced professional whose career began, less than prominently, with Edward D. Wood's go-go-fest *Orgy of the Dead* in 1965. He went on to alternate respectable gigs shooting *The Waltons*, *Lou Grant* and *Dallas* with movies like *Octamian* (1971), *Born Nigger* (1974), and *The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington* (1977). He also rose to the occasion for more demanding and creative jobs, such as Richard Blackburn's poetic revenge *Lenora: A Child's Tale of the Supernatural*, and Tobe Hooper's hallucinatory *Death Trap* (aka *Eaten Alive*, 1976). "Bob Caramico and I met through a sound mixer that I was working with at 20th Century Fox," Traxler relates. "Bob and I got together, we got along well, he said he'd do *Sithu* if we secured the financing and that was it. Bob Caramico is the only reason



COMING SOON!

SLITHIS

SPAWNED FROM
NUCLEAR ENERGY

A VICTIM OF OUR
SOCIETY . . .

SLITHIS

JOIN THE FAN CLUB

at the top of the page and opposite
Slithis director Stephen Traxler drew on the
film not only for monster movie inspiration
but also for the sustained and inventive
promotional campaign. Newspaper editors and
movie writers were given a wide range of
actual slogans to choose from, many of
which also earned membership of the Slithis
fan club. A glance through the online at the
Internet Movie Database proves how effective
the Fan Club and the promised (though not
always received) Slithis Survival Kits were -
indeed, the club has even generated its own
Web Message Board thread!

WHEN WAS THE LAST
TIME YOU SAID . . .

SLITHIS

IT RHYMES WITH
"WITH US"

HELL HATH NO
FURY . . . LIKE . . .

SLITHIS

OVER 50,000 MEMBERS
AND STILL GROWING . . .

my partner and I completed this picture on time and on budget. He may be the only reason we completed the picture at all. Bob was a genius. He ran his guys hard - small crew of grips and electricians, and treated them tough, but they worshipped him. Soon after my film Bob went legit and basically did union work for the rest of his career. Paul and I visited him on the set of the *Law & Order* TV show - was the last time I saw him."¹

Shooting at the Venice locations began in the spring of 1977, for twelve days. "Seven of those were actually nights and three were on the water - in and around the Marina del Rey," Traxler explains. "The first day of filming was the interior of our hero's apartment. It was the place where I'd stayed while my broken leg was healing and the place where I'd written the screenplay. The locations were as important as the cast, maybe more so. Venice and the Marina were extremely photogenic before the area was as gentrified as it is today. This was my production value, and my partner Paul and I spent a lot of time finding the most atmospheric location sites possible. There was no studio - everything was filmed at practical locations. You should see some of the cool places that we filmed but didn't end up in the movie. Because of the canvas and overall ambience, Venice was absolutely unique and totally conducive to the story."

A classic 'man-in-a-rubber-suit' monster flick, *Slithis* most clearly resembles Irv Berwick's *Creature from the Black Lagoon* knock-off *The Monster of Piedras Blancas* (aka Berwick). "The monster suit was beautiful," laughs Traxler. "It was designed and constructed by the artist Catherine Deeter and her staff, who had absolutely no experience in costumes of this type. It looked terrific but was totally impractical. Catherine had a small studio connected to her place in the Hollywood foothills. I believe she was a fine artist who worked in a variety of mediums, and a designer. I cannot, for the life of me, remember how we got turned onto her. I don't think she continued a career in film. The *Slithis* experience had a way of doing that to people." Once Win Condict - a friend of mine who was a great water man and all-round athlete - was in the suit, it literally had to be sewed up, then glued shut with rubber cement. It took a long time to get him in and even longer to get him out (for fear of damaging the thing). When we filmed, Win would be in the suit for hours. Extraction for a pee was not an option."

Rather like the B-film movies Traxler drew upon, no one really shines in the acting department. Traxler remarks, "Alan Blanchard, the lead, was a nice young guy, a little bland but that's just what I was looking for. I wanted him to be the normal-Norman type who aspires to something more and suddenly finds himself in the middle of events he doesn't understand and can't control. Judy Motulsky was attractive and smart. I wanted her to play the girlfriend who was slightly irritating. The character was happy with where she was at and didn't understand why her boyfriend didn't feel the same way. Some have said she comes across as annoying - shame on me but that's what I wanted. Me to Alexandria was terrific as the Jamaican seaman that became pivotal to the adventure. That's his real accent. I had not originally planned on that character being black but I knew Mello and suddenly I couldn't see it any other way. It was lucky. Mello brought in a huge black audience. The film played to sell-out crowds at the Adams Theater in Detroit for three weeks in a row (at the time I was told that it was the largest black house in America). The film has been accused of having six kinds of bad acting. These were very

inexperienced actors (it was a non-Screen Actors Guild shoot) being led by a totally inexperienced director. Under the circumstances I feel they all did a great job.

Traxler vividly recalls the excitement and exhaustion of his first time behind the camera: "Directing the film was a trip. Initially even though I'd worked on film sets for years, I was terrified. That lasted about half a day because fear was a luxury I couldn't afford. We had a very ambitious schedule - a lot of locations, inexperienced personnel in almost every position and no money. There was virtually no room for error. I was determined, in the look and feel of the film, to make the lack of money work for us instead of against us. Luckily, all the preparation time had paid off. Things moved so fast that we moved by instinct. The post-production went on forever because our editor Robert Ross, was a buddy, working for me for almost nothing, who had a day job as an assistant editor at Universal. He'd come to our office (the production office had turned into our editorial space) after working a day at the studio. He was usually beat to death and would work on our film for only a couple of hours before he faded. During the day I'd do the clean-up work and continue to carefully cut the film on our Moviola. It was a horrible experience that went on for months and months. We had so little money that we would get humped at the lab - our TV clients took precedence over our low-budget deal, and almost everywhere else. Our post sound was done by Bill Shippy, who had a studio in his home. Our music was done by Steve Zuckerman who hired amateur musicians, rented the music room at the local junior college and recorded the entire score in half a day.

Slithis was conceived as a kid-friendly PG-rated film, although the occasional bursts of violence caused a few headaches when it came time to submit the film to the MPAA. "Our original rating was the equivalent of today's 'R' which was unacceptable. We went back twice, cutting more and more shock and violence, until we were given a 'PG' rating. Then we went back to the editing room, put some of the deleted material back in, and had the negative cut.

On the *Slithis* Trail

In 1978, with the film now completed, Dick Davis showed it around the more established minor distributors, including AIP and Crown International. "Truthfully, the picture was not very good so no one felt compelled to pick it up," Traxler says. "Also, the other companies already had their slates of summer release films. Essentially we were told that there were no bookings available that summer for our picture. So, to his credit, Davis determined to release the film himself. He did this through a number of sub-distributors that then existed throughout the country. A sub would take a film and release it regionally. One sub (Crest Films for example) distributed only in Los Angeles, while another might release in a portion of a state or in several states (depending on the number of theatres). I believe Davis used twelve to sixteen subs to distribute *Slithis* countrywide. He originally ordered less than a hundred prints - that was the deal with going through subs. The film played for a week or two in one region and then the prints were shipped to the next sub-distributor - unlike major releases of today where a film opens in 2,500 screens or more across the country, all on the same day. Davis started the release in the Mid-West where he had connections with other exhibitors. Des Moines, Iowa, Omaha, Nebraska, Kansas City, Kansas."

Traxler put his shoulder to the wheel, traveling the Mid-West bergs to promote the movie locally. "I was employed at about \$300 per week to go to these garden spots, make personal appearances with the creature and occasionally show up on local TV or radio for interviews. I remember sharing a couch with the guy who did the farm report on 'Good Morning Omaha'. It was pretty wacky but a lot of fun, and the picture played to amazing business. Held over for two or three weeks in many theatres, sold-out houses and drive-ins. Our old-fashioned marketing really worked. And as word of mouth of our picture's success spread, and the majority of films on the other independent producers' slates went in the crapper, there was more and more interest in our film. *Slithis* broke onto the weekly *Variety* Top Fifty films in the nation at something like number fourteen. This was absolutely amazing considering the picture cost \$100,000 and there were only a hundred or so prints."

Promotion didn't end with a few local TV spots. Indeed, the distribution and promotion of *Slithis* was uncommonly resourceful for the late seventies, and probably the real reason the film did so well, Traxler explains. "One night prior to distribution, Davis and I sat around in my apartment in Playa del Rey and thought about what we could do to get an edge for the picture. It was a retro film, harking back to the atomic mutation movies of the fifties, so an old-fashioned gimmick felt right. A throwback to the Joseph Levine and William Castle era. I came up with the *Slithis* Survival Kit, which was tongue-in-cheek instructions on what to do in case of a *Slithis* attack. Davis loved the idea and had a bunch printed up. It was a cheesy, folded cardboard give-away that turned out to be enormously successful. It also included an address (or was it a phone number?) where you could become a member of the *Slithis* Fan Club and order *Slithis* swag - T-shirts, hats, etc. The only problem was that Davis never had an inventory of goodies. He wanted to see how the audience would react before he spent money on the merchandise. As it turned out, a lot of people sent money in for stuff and never received it. I have no idea how Davis dealt with that."

In addition to the extravagant claims on the press kit, Traxler arranged ever more personal appearances for The *Slithis*. "We put a local high school kid in the creature costume and made a well publicized personal appearance at the largest drive-in in seven Midwestern states, outside of Omaha, Nebraska. We'd made an earlier stop at a nearby small town walk-in and as we approached the drive-in in our van, the kid (in costume except for his head) and I saw the lights in the distance. It looked like an international airport. We pulled in and the place was sold out - maybe a thousand cars and pick-ups. I'd never seen anything like it. We got the kid's head on and stopped at the snack stand - the size of a supermarket. They sold everything from pizzas to cornbread to cold beer. Suddenly the word was out - he's here. *Slithis* is here! A huge crowd (it was intermission and *Spawn of the Slithis* was next up) gathered... and as the creature began to wave to his fans, the mob surged forward. It was like a rock concert - Mick Jagger couldn't have set off a bigger riot. People lunged at the monster, grabbing at the rubber fins and appendages. The drive-in employees hurled themselves in front of the rushing mob and the terrified kid inside the costume began to cry. I spotted a large wooden ladder that led to the roof of the concession building. With the help of the theatre manager we muscled the creature over to the ladder and pulled and pushed him up onto the roof. On the

roof there was a series of spot lights shining out onto the cars below. I walked the creature to the front of the building and turned several of the spots onto him. From this location we could give the crowd their look-see while holding them at bay. It was easy to defend the ladder. People screamed and carried on for about ten minutes, until the close of intermission when the lights went out and the film began. Opening credits sent folks scurrying back to their vehicles. Under cover of darkness, we helped the kid down the ladder into the van and we got the hell out of there. The film wasn't very good, but it hit a nerve with our target audience and turned into the popcorn picture of the year. *Slithis* played to sell-out crowds at that drive-in theatre for three consecutive weeks. I was later told that it was the theatre's most popular movie of the summer of '78.

Into the Mainstream

Traxler's career has since taken him to the very top of the Hollywood tree, with prestigious gigs as production supervisor on massive productions like *Waterworld* (1995) and *Windtalkers* (2002). He remains, however, appreciative and affectionate when it comes to his slightly less than stellar debut. "Other than combat in Vietnam, directing the picture was the most exciting thing I'd ever done. The entire experience was at times the highest high and alternately the lowest low. I learned more from making the movie - my partner and I having to do literally everything ourselves than I'd ever imagined. I walked away from the project bruised, battered and with the knowledge and experience that has allowed me to do everything I've since accomplished in the film industry. There is no greater teacher than the hands-on experience of making a low-budget film. I wrote it, scrounged up the money to make it, produced and directed it, edited it (under the supervision of my friend Robert Ross). I was integral in distributing it, including creating the marketing gimmick and making personal appearance tours around the country with the creature. All things considered, I was happy with most of what we'd done. The true sign of a low-budget film is the unevenness of it all. Some things are good and some just suck. I saw so many things I'd have done differently. So many places we wasted a day on material that didn't end up in the picture, time and money that could have been spent on coverage, not just masters. Having said that, the picture was a huge success, so it's clear we did more things right than wrong. On TV, Siskel and Ebert called it the 'duggy of the week', *Us Weekly* put it in their 'Don't Bother' category for three weeks (along with *Foul Play*, *The Eyes of Laura Mars*, and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*) negative reviews, but major reviews nonetheless. As Leo Penn (Sean's dad) told me at the time, 'Hell, you've made a hundred thousand dollar movie that's playing all over the country, and they're taking you seriously'. The movie played throughout the country to packed theatres and drive-ins... it sold foreign for \$450,000 (four and half times what it cost), and I have no idea how much money it actually generated overseas (presumably millions). It played twice on late night network TV (CBS), it was an early success on video for Media Home Entertainment, it played on syndicated TV for years and it's still alive today, mentioned on many, many internet sites. So I guess I'm happy with the way it turned out. My goal with the film was to make sure my investors got their money back. I assumed that if it were at all successful I'd be given the opportunity to direct

MAKE SURE YOU
JOIN THE .

SLITHIS

FAN CLUB . OVER
50,000 MEMBERS!

YOU MUST BE
PROTECTED

SLITHIS

GET YOUR SURVIVAL
KIT SOON . .

YOU MUST HAVE A
SURVIVAL KIT TO SEE

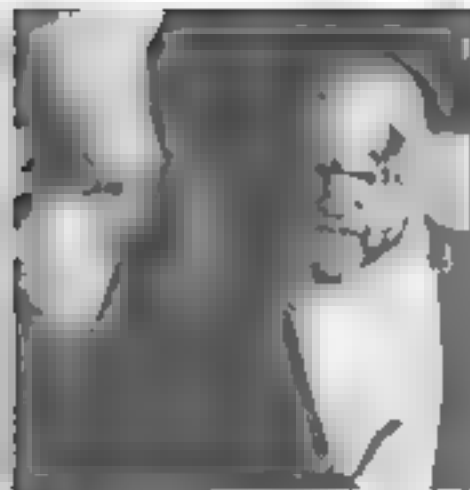
SLITHIS

YOU MUST BE
PROTECTED!

SOON TO BE THE

SLITHIS

LARGEST FAN CLUB IN
THE WORLD



1 Dennis Lee Faltz reveals his
the history of the

another. I made the picture with a very specific game-plan but never took it at all seriously — there was a whole lot of tongue-and-cheek going on. My first target audience was the crowd that goes to the movies to laugh and hoot, answer back to the dialogue and spit popcorn boxes at the screen. These folks used to exist, big time. Not so much anymore. Second, I was going for the hardcore sci-fi and horror fans who would automatically go to any film — good or bad — in the genre. The *Fungoria* groupies. Finally, and this was presumptuous of me, I was hoping that somehow the film might get noticed by a higher level of moviegoer who would get the intentional humour, the mundane references, the more terate aspects of the film. Ultimately, we got an extremely lucky and snagged a good portion of all these audiences. We had one early screening for the Sci-Fi Horror Academy — a fairly sophisticated association of fans. The house was packed and the reception was amazing. They laughed a lot, which was exactly what I was hoping for — generally for the right reasons. There was a gasp or two. Even a scream. All in all, we did appealed to one of the core groups I was after.

The only part of Traxler's plan that didn't come off was his desire to secure a return for his investors. Like so many distribution weasels, Dick Davis disappeared back into the woodwork without paying what was owed to the other investors, even though he did try to persuade Traxler to pen a sequel: "I refused to make a sequel for the distributor because the son of a bitch wouldn't pay me a penny more than I made on the first one — which was nothing — and wouldn't increase the budget. I worked with several attorneys (all acting *pro bono* because they'd read in the *L.A. Times* how I was being cheated) to try and force the distributor to give my partner and I (and the other investors) our fair share" all in vain. The film did well, but my partner and I got screwed by Dick Davis, and our Orange County investors never got their money back. This one hundred thousand dollar movie, shot in twelve days, generated untold millions of dollars in profits — but my partner and I never even got their money back.

Stung by the experience, Traxler took the lessons he'd learned from *Slithis* and parlayed them into a highly successful career in production. And when it comes to production logistics, it doesn't get any bigger and crazier than the Kevin Costner star folly, *Waterworld*. "On that film, I ran the longest and largest Second Unit in film history, or so I've been told," he says. "Both *Slithis* and *Waterworld* were extremely challenging and just as

gratifying in their own way. *Waterworld* was the most expensive film ever made, prior to *Titanic*. It was a massive logistical effort and a feat beyond imagination because our unit worked out on the water — beyond the breakwater virtually every day. That experience is worthy of a book all by itself. *Waterworld*, in my action-oriented mind, is a classic. It was the most difficult project I've been involved in, both physically and mentally. I was on the big island of Laysan, for almost ten months. I'm proud of the work we did. The hubbub on this one was the price tag: \$180 million. An obscene amount of money. It could cure cancer or pay for 80 smart bombs dropped on America's enemies, the latter being the crime against humanity of our time. What most people don't know is that *Waterworld* made a lot of money — and not for the company that financed it. That was the Japanese conglomerate Matsushita. The winner in this deal was Scaramo. They bought the studio from the Japanese corporation. *Waterworld* cost approximately \$180 million, not to mention prints, promotion and advertising was told that our Second Unit alone cost \$20 million dollars (although we did not have a dedicated accountant). The film did about \$91 million, domestic. What wasn't reported by the media is that the film eventually did gangbusters, both foreign and on home video, and ultimately made many millions of dollars profit. By the time the film went sold into the black Matsushita had sold the studio to the Canadians (Scaramo — the Bronfman family) and that's the company that benefited.

Meanwhile Traxler's TV movie *Sam Chin Hill: Search for a Homeless Man* (1993) has played regularly on Sky Movie Max. "It certainly isn't as whacked as *Slithis* but it shares some of the same sensibilities. We shot the picture in Santa Barbara for \$1 million in sixteen days, financed by a company in Beverly Hills who made movies for TV for foreign distribution only. It's shown all over the world and made the distributor a great deal of money, many millions. My partner and I got screwed on our back-end but I did make some money up front. See a pattern here?"

And for the future? "I'm currently prepping a very short, low-budget, sci-fi movie. It's a very low-budget, low-budget independent — they're really the most fun.

1 Caramica died on 14 October, 1997.

The Monster of Piedras
5 2 25 1997/12



Beyond the Black Room

THE DISCOURAGED HOLLYWOOD SWINGERS

The Black Room 1983

As a pair of middle-aged brother and sister (Robert Stephen Knight and Cassandra Cavioia), advertise a special room for hire in their Hollywood Hills mansion, a high-class passion-pit specifically designed for swingers. The walls are swathed in black velvet, the floor is strewn with cushions in plush fabrics, and the candle-lit ambience is given a hi-tech spin by a glowing green-white cube which acts as a table. There's also a luxurious bed, and the room is equipped with speakers from which classical music plays constantly. Meanwhile, on the sly, two-way mirrors facilitate Bridget's voyeurism and Jason's passion for erotic photography. Into this honey-trap strays Larry (Jimmy Stutts), a married man looking for a place where he can explore the sexual fantasies he feels unable to indulge with his loving wife Robin (Clara Perryman). So far so kinky, but there's a further sting in the tail—Jason and Bridget are really vampires, using the enticements of the Black Room to entrap a succession of unsuspecting blood donors.

Modern-day vampires have been done to living-death since the 1980s, but *The Black Room* was made before the deluge that brought us such over-stylised efforts as Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983), Richard Wenk's awesome *Lump* (1986) and Jerry Ciccorilli's *Lump: Graveyard Shift* (1987). Perhaps because the film still has one foot in the 1970s, it's more than just a coke-fuelled MTV Gothfest, and balances the seductive fantasia of the Black Room with a more naturalistic look for exteriors and daytime scenes. Five years later and the same story would have been filmed with a suffocating obsession for coloured gels, slow-motion lowering curtains and faltering camera movement.

The Black Room's sense of style hovers at the edge of camp, although the film is made with a straight enough face to avoid seeming comedic. The decor of the Black Room itself is moneyed kitsch, like a boxer's idea of the village. What makes it work is the extra element of surrealism, as the 'posh' accoutrements seem to hover in blackness, the swathing folds of velvet smoothed into invisibility by the contrasting glow of the illuminated table centrepiece. The 'sexiness' of all this depends on how

much you associate fucking with good wines, tasteful music and the rustic of silk bedspreads. It's not for me, I have to say, but like it as a pastiche of how the other half loves, there's a fun moment when Jason tells Larry that the room, with its hooked-on-classics sound-system, is ready for his next hot date, putting: *How about some Chopin for a change?*

And yet, for all its air of lascivious decadence, at its heart *The Black Room* is a morally tale about infidelity, and a portrait of the way marriage can stifle sensuality. It's also a look at the hypocrisy of men who seek adulterous freedoms for themselves, but find the idea of their wives enjoying extra-marital sex infuriating and unacceptable (see *Swingers Massacre* for a less enlightened treatment of the same theme). Vane summarises all this so neatly it's a pity Stanley Kubrick didn't watch the film before dragging much the same topic out to three hours in his stately but overstuffed *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). (Funny enough the party scenes at the chateau in Kubrick's film look like a big-budget *Black Room* rip-off.) Dramatically, the best scenes come when Robin discovers that the Black Room of her husband's bed-time fantasies is actually a real place. Shocked, she retaliates by embarking on a sexual tryst with the archly seductive Jason (although the scene requires a ten-ton weight to suspend our disbelief, since Jason is as camp as Liberace's bedspread).

As a genre piece, *The Black Room* succeeds admirably with plenty of tension to go with its good ideas. It's the sort of low-budget B-pic that makes you weep at the way the Hollywood mainstream squeezed such small but rewarding treasures out of the running. It's well-acted, well-written, and the careful use of Steadicam brings a dash of elegance that thankfully doesn't degenerate into a queerness (a chief drawback of Steadicam being a director's inability to unclasp the damn thing and go back to the dolly). In particular there's a wonderful scene, powerfully shot through a wide-angle lens by cinematographer and future director of *The Hunter* Robert Harmon, in which a female victim breaks free from the killers' macabre blood-draining apparatus and makes a run for it. The moral themes and horror movie trappings don't overbalance or contradict each other, and the blood-draining sequences are suitably

A 1983 admat for *The Black Room*.



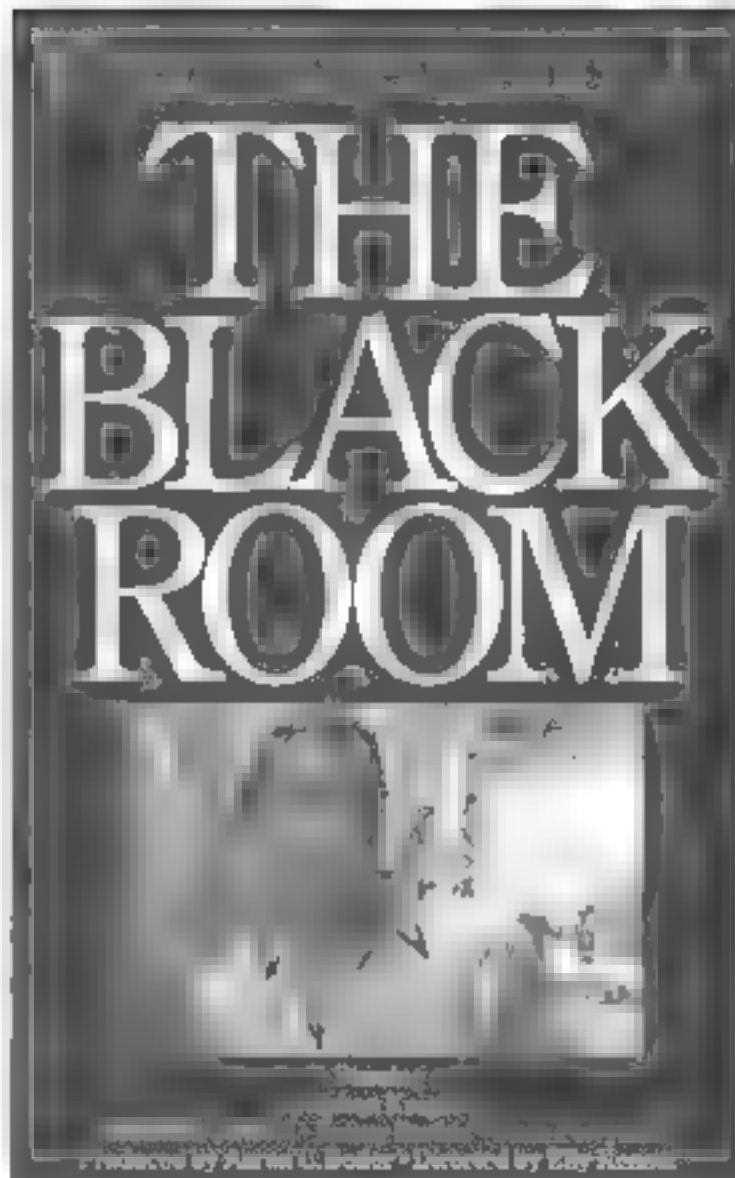
A stylish little thriller with a sense of humor and a command of horror clichés. Compared to most of the movies it will be showing double bills with, it is a master piece." — Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*

Writer-director Norman Thaddeus Vane, an experimenter of the theater, has hit upon a clever notion and developed it with wit and humor. The film may be modest in budget but has style in abundance. — *Thomas, Los Angeles Times*

Acting horror movie icon Conrad Ragzoff (Ferdinand Mayne) is determined that his funeral will be as macabre and magnificent as his films. He even installs a video screen in his mausoleum, from which, in a pre-recorded message, he can bid extravagant farewell to the world. Ragzoff dies, and all goes according to plan, his funeral a hi-tech marvel. However, after the ceremony a group of horror fans (Saint (Luca Bercovici), Oscar (Alan Stone), Doris (Joanna McDaniell), Stu (Jeffrey Combs), Mel (Jennifer Starrett), Bobo (Scott Thompson), and Eve (Carlene Olson) decide to steal the star's corpse for a last impromptu party. Big mistake. Ragzoff, in view of irreverence, coming back to life and punishing those who would rewrite his final scene. Soon the rest are learning the hard way that *no one* upstages Ragzoff, and if you want him at your fanboy gathering you'd better be ready to pay.

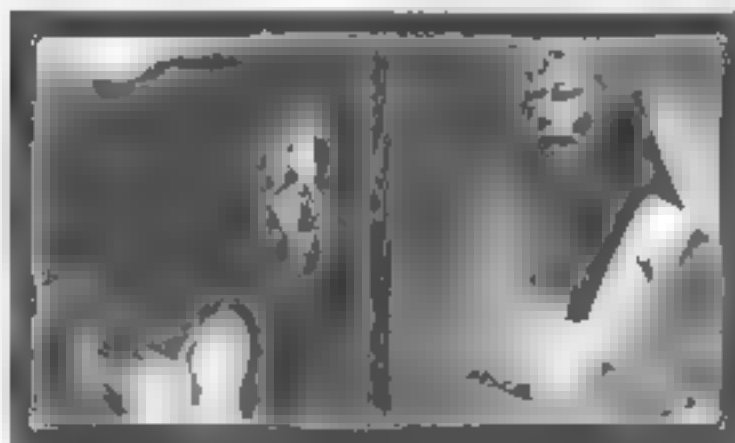
With three death scenes in the first fifteen minutes, veteran actor Ferdinand Mayne is given a suitable heroic introduction in *The Horror Star*. Norman Vane's ode to the grand old masters of horror, Mayne—who is a best known to discerning fans for Roman Polanski's *Fearless Vampire Killers*, can count this role as another feather in his cap. Unlike Peter Bogdanovich's which cast Boris Karloff as a horror icon redefined by modern life, *The Horror Star* is designed to give the masters the last word. There are traces of Christopher (not to mention Orson Welles) in Conrad's speech: "I have been a horror star, but an eminent actor. I played Juri in *Brecht's* before you were born. I did *Uncle Remus*. George Bernard Shaw on the London stage. He called me a gremlin in your daddy's eye." And of course Ragzoff's screen persona owes much to that beloved classic *Dracula* Vincent Price. The film is chock-full of references, from the relationship between Conrad and German director Wolfgang (Leon Askin) to the corpse-stealing idea itself, which takes its cue from the Hollywood story of Errol Flynn borrowing John Barrymore's corpse for an evening's partying. Last but not least, Ragzoff's elaborate send-off is the funeral dear to Bela Lugosi might have dreamed of. Like Lugosi is buried in his cape, reusing the same idea.

As we join Ragzoff, his career is on the skids, reduced to toting out his vampire schtick for TV commercial gigs, although judging by the opulent house in which he lives, and the no-expense-spared funeral arrangements, making these low-rent appearances because he's adding to the limelight, not because he needs the money. Perhaps when an irritated Ragzoff kills the TV director by hurling him off a balcony, Vane blurs the line between Roman and Ragzoff-the-monster a bit too soon, but at least



humble (easily a match for *Invasion of the Blood Farmers*, a first spin on the same imagery). Sceptics among you might wonder how the hell Jason manages to obtain clear photographs of people in the black room through a pane of glass, when the room he's standing in is fully lit, but let's not get too cynical. — Who knows what tricks vampire photographers have up their sleeves?

The film ends with Larry and Robin forgiving each other as they drive off with their rescued children and their partially exsanguinated babysitter (Linnea Quigley) in the back seat. It's a disappointingly staid conclusion to a story that has suggested far more interesting avenues. Jason and Bridget are left in a narrative limbo, apparently back from the dead—more like zombies than vampires, but presumably needing a new home when Larry calls the police. A better (if obvious) ending would have seen the married couple say the vampires only to take over where they'd left off, and put the room back on the market. Still, minor quibbles aside, *The Black Room* is an entertaining horror tale that drops intelligence, imagination and style



to release

Cassandra

11/11/98

Dogs

Ray 11/11/98

11/11/98

as The Witch in

fantasy gone

2-11-11 Conan the Barbarian 1982



explains his eventual sojourn in hell (without it, we would have had to conclude that overacting is a mortal sin). Straight after this, we see Ragzoff at a film convention, graciously accepting an award from his adoring fans (many of whom are styled in that weird '90s no-man's-land between New-Wave-Lite and Leather-Jacket & Perm.). Thoroughly charmed by the adulation, Ragzoff suffers a heart attack, and he's only saved by the intervention of nice-guy Meg, who revives him mouth-to-mouth.

The fun continues when Ragzoff stages a death-bed rise, fooling Wolfgang into revealing his true feelings, but the highlight of the film is the star's video eulogy to himself at his own funeral. (Quite why everyone doesn't do this now that video cameras are so cheap, I don't know.)

The wry, sardonic script gives Ferdinand Mayne plenty around which to roll his tongue, and as he addresses the startled guests, the combination of neon-tube kitsch and imposing marble gives the film a stylistic lift—it's like *Liquid Sky* crossed with *Plinthism*. These video messages are doled out throughout the film, as various characters break into the star's mausoleum: in one of the film's funniest ideas, Ragzoff has wired his crypt to detect intruders, so he can scare 'em shit out of them from beyond the grave.

Yet it turns out Ragzoff barely needs such technological marvels, as he's soon back on his feet, exacting what many would feel was a fair price for defilement of tomb and the hell of his corpse. In the film's best scene, the grave-robbing horror fans seal their fate by spawning

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Scene from *The Horror Star*

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Ragzoff's corpse around the room for a dance. Mayne acts the scene beautifully, giving Ragzoff's features a hint of mortification as his cadaver is subjected to an undignified wirl, and Vane knows how to milk the scene for maximum creepiness, scoring it with waltz music that gradually skews out of control, making the most of a whirling camera and wide-angle lenses. Brian De Palma himself would have been proud of the result.

I don't know if Vane intended to make the 'film fans' as hateful as possible, but they certainly raised my blood-lust. Perhaps *The Horror Star*'s biggest problem is that we're left in the company of these appalling characters for too long before Ragzoff gets even. Believe me: having their eyes pierced and popped, or their entrails eaten while they watch, is the least these jokers deserve. There's a plausibility problem too: once girl Meg actually revived Conrad with the kiss of life when he collapsed during a murder, it seems a bit unlikely that she would go along with the stealing of his corpse and its treatment as a figure of fun. It's also a bit of a stretch to believe that true committed horror fans would abuse their idol like this. Perhaps if they were common-or-garden high schoolers instead of your actual film geeks. Still, with a tongue-ripping, an immolation, a decapitation, a gassing, a skull-mash via flying coffin, and an enforced cremation, we who sympathize with Ragzoff are pretty well-served by events. (And if unsympathetic teens put you off this film, it's worth taking a look at Vane's *Midnight*, which largely dispenses with the young, following up *The Horror Star*'s 'horrorwood' theme by scrutinizing the life and loves of an ageing horror hostess. The two would make an ideal double bill.)

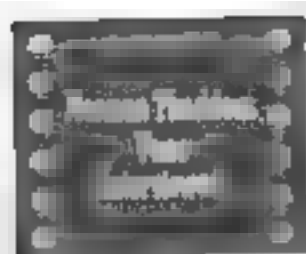
There are some continuity problems, such as a séance which seems to take place in daylight while a supposedly simultaneous resurrection takes place at night, and it seems a bit unlikely that Robo should return unharmed to the mausoleum the night after stealing the corpse, as the police are already aware of the theft. Perhaps the over-zealous séance lighting is to blame for giving the wrong impression in the first instance, but there's a rather hurried, ad-hoc

approach to the film's time-frame, especially in the second half of the story. The grave-robbing and the party take place at night. We then have a single shot of the police at the mausoleum, in daylight, before the séance begins and Ragzoff is revived, again at night. Just what the seven grave-robbers have been doing during the day is never explained; since the girls are still in nightdresses and the guys are mostly topless, perhaps they've spent the day making out on coke?

More seriously, *The Horror Star* suffers from a second half that fails to be quite as amusing or interesting as the first. Most, though not all, of Ragzoff's best scenes are concentrated into the first forty minutes, and the remainder of the film plays out a supernatural stalk-and-slash scenario that's fun, but not as clever. *Fangoria*'s video reviewer 'D. Cyclops' claims that, "[The] second half abandons the sense of humor of the first half and becomes a mechanical and unimaginative slaughter picture. I think this is overstating things (I laughed out loud, for instance, at the flying coffin sequence, hardly the most conventional murder methods), but there's a grain of truth here. Perhaps it's the dampening effect of all those teenage horrors that began by concentrating on the lives of complex adult characters, but *The Horror Star* could do with a smidgen more innovation in its last two reels.

Ultimately, what *The Horror Star* really needs is a decent widescreen DVD release to make the most of its lustrous cinematography, especially when it comes to the copious shadows amid which the latter stages unfold. Vane's framing looks unnaturally cramped on 4:3 vid, so we would doubtless sing his praises far more readily. I could see what he intended us to see. It's clear, even on video, that the film is very well lit and composed, but sad *The Horror Star* has not appeared on any home video format since the 1980s. Like many of the most interesting films in this book, it seems to have been consigned to video hell. But never mind – as Ragzoff says, "Hell is not as bad as you think. It's actually quite pleasant. Maybe the fi is a trifle overcooked, and the champagne – Catiforman! – you do meet the most interesting people."





Like most serious horror fans, Vane became aware of Norman Thaddeus Vane thanks to two horror films released on UK video: *The Black Room* and *The Horror Show*. However, Vane's career has stretched much further than experimental improvised dramas to scriptwriting results on major studio productions, spanning some forty years and three continents. He has enjoyed success as a playwright, lived and worked in Great Britain during the swinging sixties, moved to the higher echelons of *Thriller* magazine, and contributed a script to the *Nasira* (an Fantasy horror TV series).

Norman Thaddeus Vane was born in Patchogue, on Long Island, New York in 1933. He studied at the University of British Columbia for a few summers, spent a year at Florida State University when he was in the Air Force, and two years at Columbia University in New York, plus two years at the Actors' Studio in New York. He began his creative career as a playwright, becoming a member of New York's New Dramatists Company, alongside luminaries like Paddy Chayefsky. His first play, *The Penguin*, starring Martin Landau, was a modest off-Broadway hit in 1956. A year later he landed a writing job on an episode of the popular TV series *Kraft Theatre*. For his first screen credit, he contributed an episode called *Collision*, transmitted on 13 March, 1957. The story takes place on a foggy night in the Atlantic Ocean. Two passenger ships collide, and in the rescue one life is lost. An investigation reveals that the captain of one ship had served under the captain of the other for many years. When details of personal conflict between the two men emerge, it casts doubts on the true nature of the accident.



Soon after *Collision* aired, Vane moved to Great Britain. "I lived in England during the sixties and up until 1974, when I returned to the USA," he explains. "I had two English wives and thus was able to stay in England and work." He kept the British ladies running, with two plays: *The Man Who Played God* and *The Deserters*. The latter starred Elizabeth Sellars and was directed by the highly respected Russian émigré, film-maker and theatrical director, Boris Schneider, famous for his grandiose Stateside productions of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Schneider would later go on to direct Buster Keaton in Beckett's only cinema project, *Film* (1965). It was a testimony to Vane's writing that Schneider was willing to take time off from the American stage (where he was greatly in demand), as he rarely directed plays outside of the United States. *The Deserters* was produced by Wolfe Mankowitz (*The Day the Earth Caught Fire* and *The Millionairess*), and for a while it looked as if the play might be adapted for the screen, until a proposed movie deal to be financed by Sidney Box at Rank fell through. A deal was not lost, though, as Rank would play a role in the financing of Vane's next project.

The British Films

In 1960, Vane obtained financing for his film debut, a sixty-seven-minute drama called *Conscience Bay*. The story concerns Neely (Rosemary Anderson) and Fred (Marc Sheldon), childhood sweethearts in a poor Nova Scotian fishing village, who discover that Ben (John Brown), a good-looking youth with a hunchback, has been stealing the lobster catch. Ben lives in a semi-derelect fishing boat called the 'Seabird' which lies isolated in the estuary. Neely, the adopted daughter of local evangelist Caleb (Mark Dignam) and his sick wife Aunt Boo (Catherine Wilmer), discovers that Ben is Aunt Boo's illegitimate son. He has run away from his cruel foster-parents and now lives in Conscience Bay, feeding for himself. He steals



Deserters

Vane clowns in

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Body Snatchers...
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Beyond the Black Room



Cats on the set of
...ing a hat

... Midnight

because it's the only way to earn a crust: the local fisherman won't give him a job, so he seizes a pilfered lobster to a grave: ing under Nelly and Ben become friends and then lovers, soon their relationship supersedes Nelly's feelings for Fred. When Aunt Boo's illness deepens, Nelly brings Ben to the house: mother is reunited with son and asks his forgiveness. Ben returns to the 'Seabird' with Nelly, and the two make love. The next morning, Caleb arrives and finds the young lovers in bed together. Furious, he informs them that Aunt Boo died during the night and curses them for their 'sin'. After a further confrontation with Caleb, Ben runs away, telling Nelly not to come to him again. He returns to his sister. A jealous Fred tells Caleb that Ben is the lobster thief, and Nelly must sacrifice her inheritance to save Ben from mob violence at the hands of the fishermen. Disillusioned with small town life and realising she has never really loved Fred, Nelly chooses to leave Conscience Bay with Ben and inherit their fortune together in the wider world. The film, shot on Cornish locations in seven weeks, at a cost of just £70,000. However, *Conscience Bay* was not a commercial success. Rank, who had picked up the film for release as a 'B' feature, pulled it out of circulation, and Vane—who also wrote and produced—quickly re-edited it, but to no avail: little would be seen or heard of the film again.

He has better fortune back in the theatre, where his play *The Expatriate* was a success at The Croydon Pembroke (now The Peggy Ashcroft Theatre) in February of 1961. It starred Gordon Heath (who narrated the famous 1954 adaptation of *Animal Farm*), Frances Cuka, and Noel Harrison—Rex Harrison's actor-musician son, who had a Top Ten hit with 'Windmills of Your Mind' in 1969). Vane recalls that *The Times* called it 'an important theatrical event, not quite as important as *The Marriage of Figaro* was to the French Revolution'. Sarcasm, of course, is the lowest form of wit, but it may assume that a writer for the lofty *Times* was being sincere—but regardless of such matters, Vane was now making a name for himself on the British theatre scene.

Unfortunately, Vane's next play was one he himself describes with a shudder as "my flop." This '96 production, called *O'Malley the Duck*, starred fading Hollywood star Linda Darnay, who was at the time largely retired from the screen. Four years later, Darnay tragically burned to death in a fire at her secretary's home, while watching a TV rerun of her first rags-to-riches movie success. *Star Dust*'s *O'Malley the Duck* opened and closed within six days at The Oldham Rep, and even when Columbia Pictures bought an option on the script it did little to save Vane's disappointment.

As well as writing and directing for stage and screen, Vane dabbled in property and entertainment management, running various nightclubs, casinos and bars in London, including La Discothèque on Wardour Street, The Green Street Club in Mayfair, The Apartment on the King's Road, and, for a while, the notorious gaming club Esmeralda's Barn, in Kensington. "I had three gambling clubs, which turned out to be a lot more profitable than the film business," he recalls.

His partner in some of these endeavours was Mervyn Scala, one of the movers and shakers of the swinging sixties, a wide-boy turned gaming impresario and rock manager, whose memoir, *Diary of a Teddy Boy*, is a fascinating glimpse into London post-*Absolute Beginner*. He knew everyone, as they say, or, if not quite so far, then a friend-of-a-friend-of-everyone. His reach included The Kray twins, who bought Esmeralda's Barn in 1960, and worse: the archetypal evil landlord, Peter Rachman, from whose name the term 'Rachmanism' was derived.

Firing of the unpleasantness, he was at the heart of the 'hospitality industry', Vane decided to mount a second feature film, *Phedra* (1965, shot in 1964). In a revisionist vein bordering on the postmodern, he told the story of two struggling filmmakers, Mike (Mike Ross), an artist, and John (John Quinlan), a male model, who live together in a *ménage à trois* with their sister friend Julia (Julia White). The two young men are making a film in the *nouvelle vague* style, set in their own (Chelsea) environs, when they run out of money half-way through production. A prominent American businessman, Reeve Pastmore (played by Victor Lowmyer, the *Philly* magnate) agrees to bankroll the project, and to further ensure the success of the venture, the two *auteurs* persuade Julia to bed him. Subsequent developments lead to the break-up of the trio as their youthful idealism founders on the contradictions between their attitudes and the cold hard reality of international finance.

The story is built around numerous equivalences between fiction and reality. Mike Ross plays a painter interested in the French New Wave cinema, which he is, in real life. Julia White was an actual model, and in a further twist, when the film was shown to a Hollywood agent, he became very interested in White, began to date her, and took her off to Hollywood. The chief locations are a Chelsea artists' studio belonging to Mike Ross, and Victor Lowmyer's lavish house in Montpelier Square. Money did indeed run out half-way through production, at which point one-time theatrical agent Leonard Urry, then joint managing director of film producers Anatole de Gruinwald Limited, stepped in as fairy godfather and stumped up the required cash (whether for the same inducements and sweeteners is not on record).

It's an intriguing proposition and would make a fascinating revival one day, as it's enmeshed in connection to the sixties entertainment industry. Leading man John

Quarrier went on to form Cupid Productions, in partnership with upper-class hedonist Michael Pearson (now Viscount Cowdray), to make Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil*, shot in Great Britain during the height of the Paris Riots in May 1968. Quarrier acted in a deluge of sixties cult movies: his friend Roman Polanski's *Cul-de-Sac* and *The Fearless Vampire Killers*; George Harrison's *Wonderwall*; and the multi-director no-nostalgia *Cashno Royale*. An unusual casting coup came in the form of Victor Lowmes, right-hand man to *Playboy*'s Hugh Hefner. Lowmes arrived at *Playboy* in the mid-fifties, and soon made his mark by charming reluctant businessmen into advertising with the magazine. He was so successful that he once boasted he had "a cupboard full of ten foot poles" from businessmen he'd persuaded onboard. In 1960 he became closely involved with the newly emerging *Playboy* clubs, before launching the *Playboy* empire's considerable British gambling interests in 1966. A complex individual, he went on to produce Monty Python's *And Now for Something Completely Different* and, having befriended Roman Polanski in the mid-sixties, prevailed upon Hefner to support Polanski's flagrantly uncommercial *Macbeth* with *Playboy* cash.

Made in just eight days, and billed as "The first completely improvised feature film ever made in England," *Fledglings* met with a mixed response in the press, mostly due to its improvisational nature. "Much as I admire a man who can play the flute standing on his head, I cannot help wondering how much better he could play it on his feet," opined the *Daily Mail*, who also described the story as featuring "two young louts" who "receive the rebuff that all such punks deserve" for their treatment of Julia, before adding that the "pretty little model" herself contributes some "cleverly ad-libbed" scenes to the bedroom skirmishes. The *Daily Telegraph*'s reviewer began by saying that the film "has considerable academic interest" and remarked that, "some party scenes are staged rather well, and the photography [...] has a lyrical quality", but concluded that "innumerable scenes prompt an uncomfortable comparison with the work of Jean-Luc Godard." However, while Godard was valorising the existential criminal drop-out in films such as *A bout de souffle* and *Pierrot le fou*, Vane was practising what Godard could only preach: "The movie was made on stock stolen from the BBC!" he laughs. "The cameraman worked there, and every day he turned up with more stolen film." As a result of this Fassbinder-esque approach to cost management, Vane brought the movie in for a mere £2,500.² He describes the film today as, "improvised arty", and says it's his favourite of the early films. It played for a while at the Classic in Chelsea, but like *Conscience*, *Ben*, it's now dubiously difficult to see.

Swinging Scriptwriter

Turning to screenplays, Vane made a series of career moves that would eventually take him back to the USA. The first was a script based on his own mildly scandalous personal life at the time. He recalls, "My wife then was Sarah Caldwell, we had a very notorious elopement, got married in Scotland. She was only sixteen. Our marriage became the basis for *Lola*, or *Twinky* as it was known in England, a comedy which Richard Donner directed." Exploring the love affair of a fortyish writer of porn novels and a boisterous teenage schoolgirl, *Twinky* starred a nineteen-

year-old Susan George as the sixteen-year-old Sarah ('Twinky' in the film), with Charles Bronson as Vane's surrogate. "Which was disastrous," sighs Vane. "he was as funny as a kippered herring."

"Never had a girl like this for me/Dumb but pretty like a schoolgirl should be," sings Jim Dale, who wrote this Hammer-ish lyric himself along with, "Pretty young girl on a two wheel bike All I see is a Jezebel just like Twinky." It's a bit shocking to anyone who's lived through the change in attitudes to gymnasium fantasies over the last thirty years. Nevertheless, *Twinky* did fairly well on its release in 1969: little wonder, with a strap-line that assuaged many a passing male's gaze: "She had just reached the age of consent and the first word she said was 'Yes.'" *Twinky* was released by Rank in England, and AIP in America, and received mixed reviews, but Vane had scored big with the project and things were on the up.

Released before *Twinky* but written after it, *Mrs Brown You've Got a Lovely Daughter* (1968) – a musical vehicle for the dubious talents of Herman's Hermies – is not a film of which Vane is proud, even though it featured his new wife in her screen debut. "It was a silly kids movie. I never even tell anyone I wrote it, it's not on my CV is, never mention it. The guy who did the music was called Mervyn Most. He was not a friendly guy. A great talent though. I respected him." The film was to have been young Sarah Caldwell's entree into the movies, but it didn't work out. "Sarah was terrible in the movie," says Vane. "She could have had a film career, she was a top model with Teen Ford and was on the cover of many magazines, but she turned down a contract at Fox for a lot of stupid reasons and blew it. She lives now in Bath, England, and has three kids – not by me."

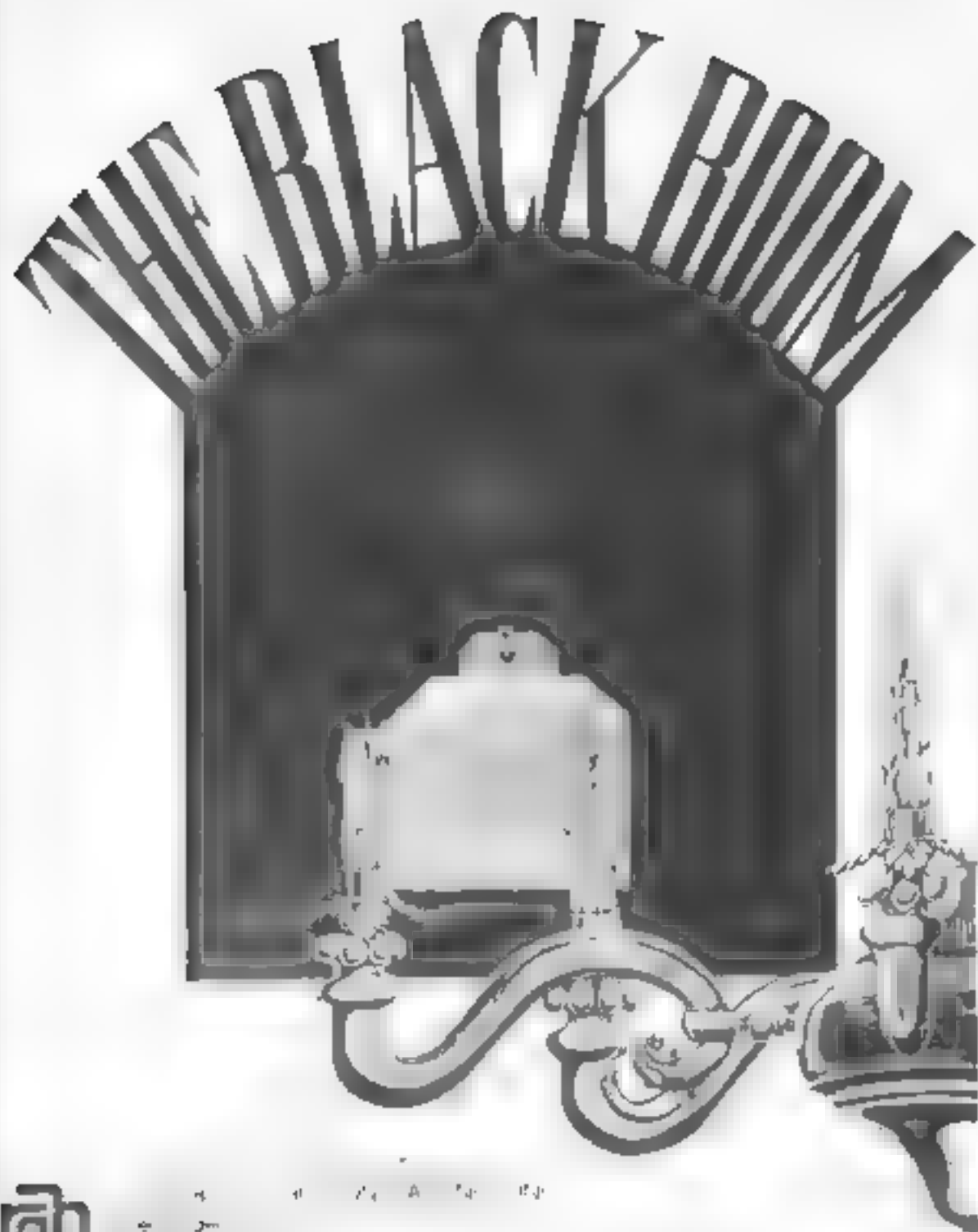
Vane made a tidy sum from the film, although the price of success was having to deal with producer Allen Klein, one of the American entertainment industry's most demonic figures; "I was literally a prisoner in the Hilton hotel for two and a half months during that shoot. I had an



Lynne Redgrave as Sarah Caldwell, most successful of Vane's movies

Vane in *Twinky* with Alan Bates (left) and The Riddler





igh

THE BLACK ROOM
A FILM BY ALLEN
CASTING BY ROBIN
MUSIC BY

The Black Room

set by Robin



enormous fight with Klein, he was showing off with about seven people, and he came to my suite at the Hilton and demanded a rewrite at two in the morning. I was in bed with some girl. I was furious that he woke me up. He was showing off to all these women in mink coats, and I said, "Okay Allen, you want a rewrite? Here's your rewrite!" and I picked up the table which was full of coca-cola bottles maybe about a hundred of them, and I threw it all over them, and the coke went on the minks. They all ran out of my suite and I went back to bed. They couldn't fire me. I was the writer! If they fired me who was going to do it? Instead, he stuck me with a \$4,000 hotel bill."

"I kept going back and forth between England and the USA from 1969 to 1974," he continues. "In '69 I was the editor of *Penthouse* as well as the theatre, film and book critic." Vane had problems with the head honcho of *Penthouse*, Bob Guccione: "He was trying to fuck my wife Sarah, under the pretence of him photographing her. I wouldn't let him. I knew better, and quit the magazine."

Despite ructions with Klein on *Mrs Brown*, by the early 1970s Vane found himself spending more and more time working for the infamous moguls ABKCO Films in California. This brought him into proximity with a number of Klein's associates, one of whom was Saul Swimmer. Klein had produced his 1962 film *Without a Pity*, which starred Tony Anthony, an actor whose association with Swimmer dated back to *Force of Impact* (1961). Al, Albee – Swimmer, Klein and Anthony produced the well-regarded spaghetti western *Blindman* (1971), directed by Italian genre specialist Ferdinando Galdi from Anthony's story and screenplay, and starring Anthony in the title role. For added boxoffice, Klein and Swimmer drew on their Beatles connections to snag Ring Starr, who plays one of the villains (Swimmer was co-producer of the *Let It Be* movie, while Klein's business dealings with the band have been well documented, not least by *The Rutles*).

Like many who have come into contact with Allen Klein, Vane is scathing about the man often credited with driving a financial wedge between Paul McCartney and John Lennon: and he has claimed to have a theory about Klein's and Swimmer's involvement in George Harrison's 'Concert for Bangladesh' (one of the most felt charity events of the 1970s, the movie of which Swimmer directed and Klein produced, that is impossible for us to verify). The final straw came when Klein allegedly deprived Vane of a decent payday: "Klein was such an asshole, don't get me started. I wrote a script for them called *The Tunnel*, which didn't get made, finally got ripped off by [a major Hollywood actor-director] who did his own version of it which bombed. But at the time I had a publisher who wanted to do a book of *The Tunnel*, and Klein just wouldn't give me the rights. I said, 'Allen it's not costing anything – he's giving me money! Let me do the book, he's gonna give me a big advance!' I think he was still mad with me about the incident in the hotel room. I tried to take him to the Writer's Guild and make him pay, he was a signatory, but they said they couldn't do it because he was out of the country."

Indians Are Indians

Moving on from Klein and ABKCO, Vane, now living full-time back in the States, set about researching material for a spooky drama about Native American mysticism, called *Shadow of the Hawk*. The film was released in 1976, but the transition from typewriter to movie screen was far from smooth. Says Vane, "*Hawk* was a horrible experience for me as I was replaced by no less than nine or ten writers and I worked with four or five different directors. The original title was *Journey Into a Nightmare*, and the script was a really scary and beautifully written story based on a synopsis that a cameraman, Peter Jensen, sold to me. I was working with Peter Guher on *Shadow of the Hawk* and he was not the easiest person in the world to work for, kind of a hate relationship, but I made a lot of money, about \$75,000, on that movie. Guher's brother-in-law was Leon Gelbois, the producer, and I worked with him on a couple of movies. He was the co-producer of *The Horror Show*. Henry brought a lot of artistry to the project, but completely lost control of the shooting. *Shadow of the Hawk* was a really interesting script. I'd gone to an Indian reservation, researching the Navajos, the Hopis. Then Peter left the movie to do *Jaws*. When he did that, Stanley Jaffe

who's the son of Leo Jaffe - one of the founders of Columbia, took over and said, 'We'll do the movie in Canada, cos we got money up there.' I called him up and said, 'Stanley, all the research is real and it all came from me living with the Navajos and the Hopis. Canadian Indians are blood Indians, they have totem poles and it's a totally different thing, they're mountain Indians - we have desert Indians.' In this story, that's what makes it so spooky. And he said, 'Oh I don't give a shit about that. Indians are Indians.' So we did it in Vancouver. Many writers came in. There had been some big director attached to it. In the end, the stuff that I'd implied, that made it really scary, they added literally - there's an idiotic mask that keeps following them around - it was ridiculous. It's hard for me to look at the movie."

Despite its troubled history, Vane was glad of the big payday, and he still holds some affection for the film. "It was much scarier in its original form, but it is still not too bad a movie, all things considered. Somehow or other, a lot of it still came through. I still get royalties on it. It opened big in Los Angeles and played pretty well across the country in theatres."

Shadow of the Hawk was a Columbia Pictures release, and so falls outside the more detailed ambit of this book, but it's hardly an over-exposed title these days, and I have to say I found it a lot more fun than I was expecting. As Vane points out, the constant apparition of the Indian mask gets to be a pain, although its first three appearances

including an excellent underwater manifestation and a window-on-the-window shock that trumps *Satan's Larva* are the only moments in the movie that are not a little bit over-the-top. The mask itself, which George turns up in the big city and persuades his grandson Mike (Jan-Michael Vincent) to return to the village of his birth and help fight a witch's malediction. The journey back to the village, with a nosy reporter/love interest in tow, forms the backbone of the narrative, and along the way the initial sceptical city-dwellers see enough manifestations of evil to convince them that the old guy is not as crazy as they first believed. (Lovers of Lucio Fulci's *City of the Living Dead* may see a resemblance and wonder what he might have done with the material.) There are several well-conceived piece scares that make it all worthwhile - look out for a stunning scene involving a car and a magical barrier, which could hold its own in a far bigger production. *Shadow of the Hawk* is solidly directed, with the occasional imaginative flourish, by George McCowan, whose *Frogs* is one of my guilty pleasures, and although the overall feel is more 'skip work to watch TV in the afternoon than late night scary movie', hardly surprising, given McCowan's work on *Star Trek* and *Hitch*, it's still worth seeing if you can.

Into the Black...

Darkly erotic - The ultimate nightmare of the bored married man's search for casual sex gone horribly wrong. - *Bill Landis, Steezoid Express book,*

After *Shadow of the Hawk*, Vane's career went into recession for a while, with one of his few credits of the period being a second unit directing gig on the porno-horror spoof *Dracula Sucks* (1979), starring Jamie Gillis, Annette Haven and genre icon Reggie Nalder (the latter appearing under the pseudonym 'Detlef van Berg'). By 1981, Vane was looking to direct one of his own scripts again.

The result was *The Black Room*, a slyly amusing if about posh vampires hiring out rooms to swingers in their desirable L.A. mansion. The inspiration for this story is surprisingly autobiographical, as Vane reveals. "I didn't tell you so I'm not telling I haven't told anyone else. While I was working for *Penthouse*, I was married to Sarah, the sixteen-year-old model and actress. We were both very attracted to each other, but neither told the other about it. I kept meeting all these beautiful women at *Penthouse* who wanted to fuck my brains out and I had no place to take them. So I rented a small room in the basement of a house of a South African painter. This was the deal: I would call him up when I was coming over, and he would go down to this lovely room in his basement, put on the music, light the candles, and open a bottle of cold wine and leave it on the table. When I arrived there with a girl - usually the latest *Penthouse* centrespread - and she saw the room with the candles, the wine cold, and Vivavid playing, she couldn't believe it. What I didn't know was the South African painter had a hole in the wall and was watching everything that we did. One day I saw a little gleam of light coming from a hole in the wall and I followed it around to the next room and caught him in the act, and for the first time understood what was going on. I immediately terminated our arrangement. By then however, four or five ladies had been through the room, and it became the basis for the movie."

Vane showed the script to a producer, Aaron Butler, and an Israeli director called Ely Kenner. "Ely Kenner had read my script. I think the original title may have been *The Vampires of the Black Room* - and they decided they wanted to do it on a budget of approximately \$30,000, Vane recalls. "It finally cost \$40,000 including post-production. That meant we had enough to shoot the film but we had no idea how we were going to get it finished. Ely was an Israeli who had never directed a movie and I had directed two small ones in England, so I directed the actors, and he directed the camera. We didn't get along very well, obviously, especially as he would stop and say things like 'I want you to cry on this line.' I explained to him that actors didn't cry on cue. I found this particularly offensive, as I came from the Actor's Studio in New York, where we had a very realistic approach to acting and did not impose objectives on the actors but let it come naturally from within."

The shooting lasted for roughly a fifteen-hour day in 1981, a surprisingly quick turn-over for such a handsome professional-looking film. Says Vane, "It was shot in a big house in the Hollywood Hills which was owned by the Mafia's literary representative in America. During the shooting there was a big candle scene - if you remember, and when we took a break, one of the tall candles melted into the curtains and set the room on fire. In total panic we managed to get out, but came very close to burning down the house of a mob producer who probably would have had us all killed."

Vane had mixed feelings about his two producers. "The first twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars was contributed by Doug Cronin, a former football player, and he insisted on being in the movie. He has a small scene in the beginning of the movie which makes no sense, in which he is killed and buried. I look at that scene with great pain whenever I see the movie, which isn't very often, and wish we could have gotten Doug the hell out of there for his sake and ours. Doug was a nice guy, and I was very fond of him, but he did not fit into the movie at all - Aaron Butler



Bridget suffers a setback during the first moments of *The Black Room*.





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The producer was a big red-headed Irishman of Jewish descent. He wore a Star of David around his neck, drank like a fish, cursed everybody and was totally obnoxious. I found it very difficult to be friends with him after the movie. I do see him now and again, the last time at Bill's distributor, Billy Fine's funeral.

It's unusual for two directors to collaborate simultaneously on a shoot, and it's a situation ripe for conflict. Vane, not surprisingly, is less than complimentary about his erstwhile colleague. "Elly and I obviously did not get along, especially as just before the shooting began he was fighting with his new South African wife Anne, who I put up in my Hollywood Hills home on Doheny Drive. (I had a friend at the time, Ruth Ann Lorenz [Lorenz' who starred in a horror movie called *Graduation Day*]. Anne refused to go back to him for a week. During this time she told me that Elly had said, 'As soon as Norman signs the contracts I'm going to fuck him.' After she shared that information with me, I made damn sure I had everything in writing with Elly and the producers before they got the script." (Kenner is currently hard to trace for his comments, having moved to Israel soon after the film was finished.)

Vane has no complaints about the look of the film. "I thought the Israeli art director was very good considering he was working with no money. I was his idea to have the green, amnescent table in the Black Room." *The Black Room*'s talented cinematographer, Robert Harmon, would himself go on to direct, scoring a sizeable international hit with *The Hitcher* (1986), starring Rutger Hauer and C. Thomas Howell. Vane recalls, "Robert Harmon did a really good job as DP. After the movie, he did a demo reel for \$10,000, got an agent at William Morris, and directed quite

a few horror movies himself. One actor that I got a SAG card for was Christopher McDonald, who later starred in quite a few television movies and was featured in several regular movies as well. But I did start him on the road, as I have done with many, many actors and actresses. L'onea Ouligley was in *The Black Room*. I picked her out of a

reading, and she went on to become a 'Scream Queen' in many horror flicks. I thought she was basically terrific. Cassandra Cava was truly marvelous and I see her at parties occasionally, including one a few months ago at Christmas at a studio. She starred opposite Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Conan the Barbarian* where she played an erotic witch.

With the release of a born starvie, he continues, "Now I'll go even further and tell you a couple of things I really shouldn't. The lead actress was Clara Perryman, a girl of Scottish descent about twenty or twenty-one at the time, tall and very pretty with red hair. I was mad about her from the first moment I saw her and fought very hard to get her the lead. In the end, in order to get Clara the lead, I had to trade other choices. The truth is, during the readings and the casting, which was about three or four weeks, Clara and I had an affair of sorts. She really blew my head. I was half in love with her, however as soon as we signed the contracts it ended. But she was a terrific actress and she was great in the movie and a delight to work with and I never had any regrets. After the movie started shooting I heard from everyone that Stephen Knight, the very good looking leading man, was having an affair with Clara and continued to do so during shooting as well as during post. I lost track of Clara and have never seen her again, except as the lead in the play *Nurse*, which played at a nice theatre in Hollywood.

The Black Room was eventually released, two years after it was shot. Says Vane, "The post-production went on forever and I pretty much dropped out of it. We kept getting money in dribs and drabs from Robert Hussong until the movie was finished. Hussong, an agent and a distributor, put up the finishing money and he controlled selling the movie. He died six or seven years ago and he avoided paying almost everyone. I did get a fairly large check a few years ago for the writer's share of the video rights, which surprised me. It was sold basically to video all over the world and I am forever hearing about it from horror fans who seem to think it's a classic. Cassandra Cava tells me whenever she goes to a festival she is swamped by people asking for her autograph.

The Black Room proved to be ahead of the pack in its association of vampires with contemporary style. Although one would not wish to blame Norman Vane for what came next, Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983) treated vampirism as a chic appurtenance to fashion-magazine aesthetics, and although it failed to set the box office alight the film was embraced by Goth-lite *fashionista* yuppies as a symbol of their *so-decadent-dahling* pretensions. Of course, there was an earlier precedent: Count Dracula himself cut rather a dash and his castle, not original features, house-hunters' was hardly a stigm tenement. Essential v. though, the Count was 'old-money' and his style was a function of his aristocratic ancestry. When the vampire was updated in the 1980s, passing over such earlier, proletarian anomalies as George Romero's *Martin*, the 'greed-is-good' ethos saw the yuppie bourgeoisie arriving at the castle gates. Vampires became the avatar of choice for coke-sniffing clubbers in touch with their 'dark side'.³

Despite the less than congenial circumstances of the production, Vane remains proud of the story's idiosyncrasies. "It was the only vampire film ever made where the people were real and really did have a blood disorder and their need for blood was real and not based on some mythical vampire legend.

Shooting *The Horror Star*

turning away from the drawn-out post-production hassles of *The Black Room*. Vane took another of his scripts into production, this time without a co-director to crimp his style. "*The Horror Star* was vague & based on a famous old Hollywood story," he explains, "which was that several Hollywood actors—including Errol Flynn—kidnapped the lead body of John Barrymore for one night and brought him back to his Hollywood mansion for a few well-dinner. In essence that is what inspired me to do *The Horror Star*." The movie was financed by an Iranian real-estate tycoon I met at a party, and two Saudi Arabian princes. How much I can't even remember. I put in a little money myself and so did a lawyer in New York. My partner was Henry Gelinas, who had produced *Shadow of the Hawk*.

Despite its 1981 copyright date, Vane maintains that *The Horror Star* went into production in the spring of 1982, with a three-week shoot, although it too was finished until '83. "*The Horror Star* was shot partly in a studio, partly in a cemetery in Hollywood, and mostly in an old mansion I found near USC," Vane recalls. "The minute I walked into the mansion and walked up the stairs and went into the library and saw that the bookcases turned completely around into the wall, I knew this was the place."

With Ferdinand Mayne, Vane knew he had a strong central performer to rely on, and so spent more time coaching his young supporting cast, which included Le Trev Combs, soon to find fame as Herbert West in Stuart Gordon's hit *Re-Animator*. Vane also worked very closely with Joel King, who had gone from a gig as camera operator on Brian De Palma's *Carrie*, to cinematographer on Paul Leder's *Sketches of a Strangler* and Jeff Lieberman's *Just Before Dawn*. "Joel was a

brilliant cinematographer, but a nuisance beyond all belief. I used him again on *Club Life*. We were at it & overheads quite a bit, but I appreciated the artistry he brought to the shooting. If he hadn't had problems he might have become a director. As a cinematographer, his work was that good. One of the problems is that we were on a limited budget and I would be happy getting to 'take three' or 'take four' but he would insist on going to 'take nine or ten' because he wanted to do it better. We kept running out of money and I had to keep going back to the investors. That's okay in studio films, but not in films like *The Horror Star*, which was being made on a budget of \$120,000.

After the movie was finished, MGM showed some initial interest but eventually decided to pass. The film was instead put out by Saturn International Pictures, which led to an amusing encounter with a future "king" of the world—as Vane reveals. "One of the posters which was not used, but tested very well, was the one with all of the faces on the wall. It was the same as the ending already. This was done by James Cameron. At the time Saturn was also distributing his film *Piranha II*. Anyway, James did a wonderful poster except he couldn't draw the young girl's face. The face that he drew was that of a twenty-five-year-old woman, not a seventeen-year-old girl. So since we were paying for the poster—I think he got \$200 for it—I got another painter to draw in a young girl's face. When Cameron saw this, he started to tear up the poster just a week or so before the movie was scheduled to go out. I went nuts. I ran across the room and punched him. He punched me back. We rolled all over the floor punching each other before the two distributors pulled us apart. I'm sorry I did that, I obviously didn't know he was to become a famous director but he did ruin up our poster. We shook hands later and sort of made up."

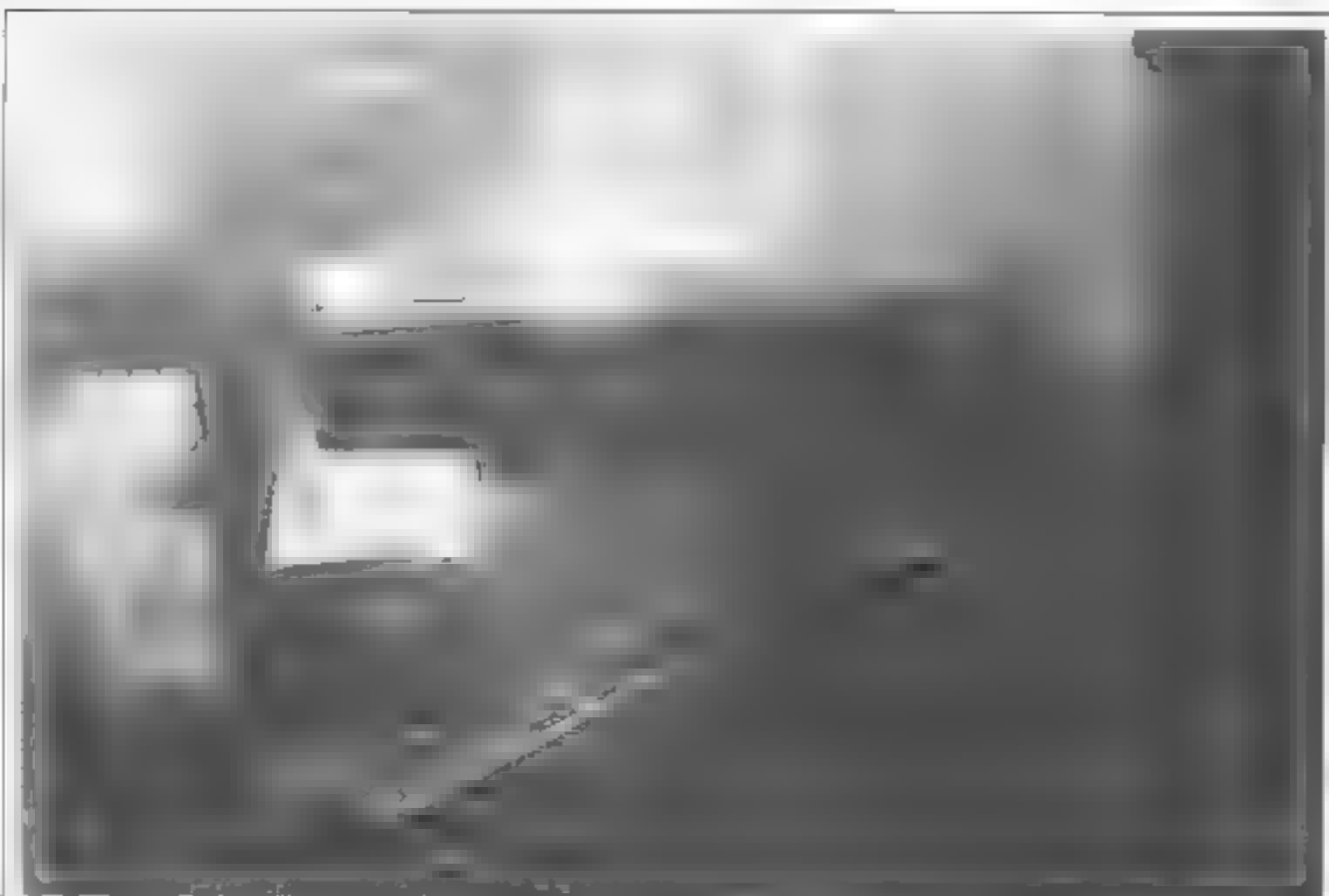


Working on the poster for *The Horror Star*.
Ferdinand Mayne
Cameron was the director of *Piranha II*.

Revisiting the poster for *The Horror Star*.

Poster for the alternative title *Frightmare*, directed by Titania and Paramount.

Ferdinand Mayne, who shot the film, and the poster for *The Horror Star*.



Alternative title *Frightmare*, released by Paramount in 1983.

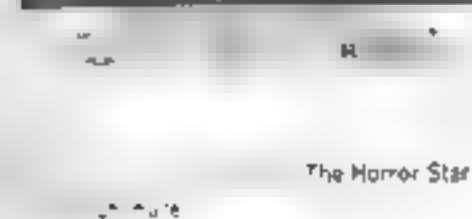
"FRIGHTMARE"
Released by Saturn International Pictures.

The poster for the movie *FRIGHTMARE*.





The Horror Star



He continues: "For the opening night in Los Angeles, the movie was in about fifteen drive-ins and thirty-five theatres around the city. That Friday night was the worst rain storm in years and it rained all over the weekend which didn't help the box office. But the movie did go out in various cities and got really good reviews, people seemed to like it. The Manson company gave us \$100,000 up front to distribute the movie foreign. They did a good job in selling it, but were very crooked with the books, as all foreign film distributors based in America are. There is no exception to this statement. If you are going to get into the foreign distribution business you are going to get well and truly fucked. The movie grossed, to the best of my knowledge, about \$350,000 foreign and they got two-thirds of that, and we got to pay back our advance and a bit more. The investors basically got almost no money and so they didn't come back for another movie as they would have. Even usually we sold the movie to Truema, a distributor in New York, but by then almost everything had been sold already so I'm not sure what they were buying."

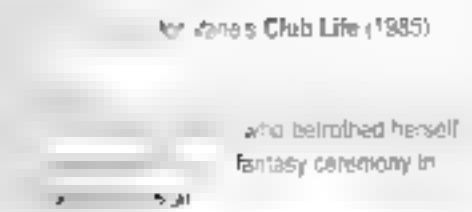
Vane found *The Horror Star* a much easier shoot than *The Black Room*: "I was much more in control of everything. Ferdinand Mayne, though, was not easy to work with. If his make-up was not to his satisfaction he would throw a tantrum and would refuse to work until we sent people around Los Angeles trying to find the shade he wanted. But he did win several awards for the film, one particularly from the Horror and Sci-Fi Festival here in Los Angeles. I would not let them screen the movie, because they wanted to screen it before it was released, and I didn't want anyone to see it before the reviews came out, which turned out to be really good. People always seem to remember the young girl dancing with the corpse of the film star and they always seem to talk about the flying coffin which killed people. That was very difficult to do, requiring a very light coffin, and a real one, and scared our leading lady, Jennifer Starrett, who would cry before each shot. Her father was the famous director Jack Starrett [*The Strange Revenge of Rosalie*, *Cleopatra Jones*]. It went out big in Europe, especially in France, where it played in fifty-plus theatres. It won second prize at the Avoriaz Film Festival, a silver medal, which I still have. Roger Ebert, probably the top American critic, called it a masterpiece compared to any other horror films of that year. The domestic distributor was Saturn International Pictures and they bicycled seventy-five prints from one theatre to another. It was bought by Vestron for video and it went out big, so much so that they offered me another horror movie called *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes*, but my producer screwed up the deal by coming in with a budget for \$900,000—\$300,000 over the figure I was supposed to bring it in on. The head of Vestron flew in from Connecticut, said, 'We told you it would have to be \$600,000, what is this?' They were furious. I could never get the thing back on track."

Club Life and Midnight

Vane's next venture was *Club Life*, aka *King of the City* (1985), a crime thriller about Cal (Tom Parsekian), a tough motocross racer who goes to Hollywood looking to become a star. He takes a job as a bouncer at a nightclub owned by Hector (Tony Curtis) and gets sucked into underworld violence. But Hector is in trouble with the Mafia, having turned down their offer for his club; Cal's old girl turns up with a drug problem, and his best buddy at the

club is shot by local hoods. Should Cal stay, seek revenge and sink to the same level as his enemies, or get out of town and leave L.A. to the scumbags who run it?

Club Life's big catch is Tony Curtis, who looks great here as the debonair, silver-haired Hector, trying to resist the blandishments of the Mob and keep drugs "at arm's length" instead of letting the dealers have free play in his venue. He's ably assisted by Lucerne Michael Parks as Tank, the resident enforcer at Hector's bar. The starring role of Cal goes to newcomer Tom Parsekian, a handsome guy with a bad perm who had the looks but apparently not the luck to continue in Hollywood. *Club Life* was his third and final screen credit. The film is brisk and fairly diverting, although it was made at the height of the power ballad craze, meaning that historic FM soft rock plays incessantly. A scene that could have been touching, such as Tank's funeral, inside the club, is ruined by some irritating rock chick belting out a tacky "requiem" that sounds like Bonnie Tyler fronting Huey Lewis and the News. The whole thing plays like a cross between *Fear City* and *Footloose*. What hampers it is a flimsy storyline with little in the way of character development, too great a reliance on over-the-top dance scenes, and an air of uncertainty revealed by a handful of needless voice-overs. *Club Life* ends fatuously with Cal dragging his junkie girlfriend out of the club, shoving her on the back of his motorbike and heading back to small-town life, leaving Sin City behind although as everyone knows, "a junkie wants a fix, they find it in Missoula if necessary."



Club Life is well outside the ambit of this book, but Vane has a few comments to make about it. He was especially amused when a recent television interviewer implied that Tony Curtis had taken the role as a favour to the director. "Well, I remember it was the exact opposite: he hadn't worked in about three years! We paid him \$100,000 for a week's work. I was doing *him* a favour and he kept saying how grateful he was that I had chosen him. Of course I was honoured to work with him, and he was a pleasure to work with. It is tough at that time he was still a bit of a drug addict, and there were times he would come down on the set and his nose would be all red, and he wouldn't let the make-up girl anywhere near him and I'd say, 'Tony, look in the mirror! Look at your nose. She's gotta do something with it, especially since we're in colour – you're gonna look like Rudolph!' He finally did. *Club Life* made a lot of money, very little of which I saw until I stole the negative from the lab (CFI), hid it in the cellar of a friend and wouldn't give it to them until they paid me, which they did. They came over to the US *en masse* – some idiots whose names I won't even mention – and tried to have me arrested. They finally coughed up some serious money and then I gave them back their negative, which I shouldn't have done, since they still owed me six figures. My lady partner stole the negative out of the editor's car when we were halfway through editing it, because the distributor said I was taking too long.

In 1988, a female friend of Vane's introduced him to a representative of the Sony Corporation. Vane showed them the script he wanted to shoot next, a horror-comedy he'd started working on in 1984, when it was called *Vampirella* (or *Vampirella* – presumably in anticipation of legal action from the real 'Vampirella'). By 1988, Vane had changed the title to *Midnight for Morticia*; he received the green light, and Sony agreed to finance the film for around a million dollars. Further hesitancy over rights issues resulted in the film eventually reaching screens as, simply, *Midnight* (not to be confused with the John Russo horror film of the same name).

Midnight (Lynn Redgrave) is a manic, unstable and hugely popular TV horror hostess, struggling to keep control of her brand identity and fighting off her on-screen manager and lover, now her arch-nemesis, Mr. B (Tony Curtis), who wants to buy the copyright to the *Midnight* character and doesn't care how low he stoops to get it. Meanwhile *Midnight* (real name Vera Kunk), well into middle age, falls in love with a leather-jacketed young stud called Mickey Modane (Steve Parrish), an aspiring actor and *Midnight* fan, who turns up late one night at the gates of her Beverly Hills mansion and talks his way into her Spandex leggings. Watching over the various indulgences, rows and indiscretions are *Midnight*'s housekeeper Heidi (Rita Gam) and butler Siegfried (Gustav Vintas). As *Midnight* comes ungummed and paranoia bites, her relationship with Mickey is subject to pressure from Mr. B, who arranges for the young stud to score a leading role in a new movie and then pays the female co-star, Angel (Karen Walter), to seduce him. Mickey – not the monogamous sort, screws Angel in *Midnight*'s bed. When *Midnight* returns unexpectedly, she throws them out. One evening, before a big Hollywood party at *Midnight*'s place, Angel is murdered in the swimming pool by an unseen assailant. Next to die is Mr. B, hanged by the neck. Has the vampish star finally gone over to the dark side?



Midnight is a genuinely oddball production, set in a world of low culture and high artifice. It's pitched at a hysterical level, with something that feels strangely real, curled up inside the clichés, or is that itself a cliché? There's a reverberant, disorientating quality to the film that conveys the giddy paranoia of life in la-la land; a story of actors hoist by their own petard, unstable flakes paid fortunes to fake it up, trying to work out what's real in the land of make-believe. Lynn Redgrave's performance is so scarily OTT that you just have to pay attention, if only because the moment she walks onscreen you feel you may be about to see the acting equivalent of a gruesome train wreck. There's the weird, acid tang of something like real-life lunacy to her performance. She plays *Midnight* as a bossy Barbra Streisand-ish diva, a Gloria Swanson-style egomaniac, a calculating Bette Davis gargoyle, and an Elvira-esque toilet-mouth, all rolled together. What gives this grotesque a much-needed extra dimension is her underlying sadness and vulnerability. *Midnight* is getting too old for her own shreck, but it's all she knows. Without it she's 'Vera Kunk', an ageing ham actress too identified with one role to get any more. Vane writes the love affair between *Midnight* and Mickey with enough subtlety to keep us guessing, along with *Midnight*, as to whether there's any real emotion behind Mickey's physical charms. Such assassinations are of course well known in Hollywood, the older actress and the young, up-and-coming hunk looking for a way into the business. *Midnight* suggests that, in Hollywood, these real-life melodramas are mined in their screen echoes. In a strange way, I was reminded of the

Tony Curtis in a scene from *Club Life*





George Segal

is of Andrzej Zulawski (*La femme publique* and *La bête*), whose work is often concerned with the poisonous of life and art, and the difficulty of locating truth. Vane is a lot less cerebral than Zulawski, but even especially in its trashy moments *Midnight* has art to it certainly more so than *Club Life*. The reason *Midnight* will probably remain a curate's egg rather than a cult favourite is that Vane leaves it too long before adding a genre dimension to his tears-behind-the-glass tale. Two-thirds of the way in, murders happen, and we're somewhat brusquely deposited in the horror genre. The model is probably *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, in which Robert Aldrich took his time moving from melodrama to horror. *Midnight* lacks the inexorable grip of that masterpiece, but still Vane achieves something different and commendable. The first time I saw *Midnight* I thought I didn't like it at all, but I kept coming back to me. I couldn't quite say I hated it, and by second view I liked it. On reflection, it conveys a true psychological shudder thanks to the hall-of-mirrors story and Redgrave's unsettling, weird performance, and may actually be Vane's best film.

Says Vane: "*Midnight* was based on Vamping and Elvira. We parodied both of them. Originally Karen Black was to have played the woman, with George Segal in the Tony Curtis part. Karen Black, who is crazier than a loon, would call me up in the middle of the night and say, 'I want to do this part but I want her to have an accent. And I said, 'Why she's an American girl, there's no accent.' She says, 'The original woman, Vampira, she had an accent.' I say 'Yeah, but she was from Germany or Hungary.' Karen, there's no accent. She's from Brooklyn.' So she quit." Vane next approached Lynn Redgrave, who said yes, but there were further complications: "George Segal said, 'I'm quitting. I'm not going to act with her. It turned out that Lynn's agent, who fired her, also handled Segal, and he seemed very mad at Lynn. He told George, 'You're not going to work with her. Lynn had a bad reputation at that time because she breast-fed her baby on set and caused a bit of scandal, she was dropped by her agency, she was doing it right on the set in front of about thirty or forty people, and it was a big story in the press. She was without an agent when I hired her.' After Karen and George quit, I had a problem: Tony Curtis wanted \$100,000, George Segal only wanted \$50,000. In order to pay Tony I had to pay that out of my salary so the movie could continue."

With its lush, refined environs of the Hollywood glamour set, *Midnight* looks expensive and, if you share the tastes of the Hollywood movers and shakers of the late eighties, it exudes a class beyond its budget. Vane bought plenty of bang for his buck by negotiating to film in an enormous Beverly Hills mansion: "It was owned by a gay German Baron," he explains. "We shot there for about three weeks, for about ten or fifteen thousand dollars a week. We had a terrible time with the neighbours because of the generators at night. The police were called, we were threatened with fines, we had to stop shooting at two in the morning. We were on a small street way up on the hill, the very top, a beautiful mansion. Stevie Nicks rented it after me for quite a while, at twenty-five grand a month. She always made big money. I was doing really well at that time, I had a really big home up there, in what they call Birdland. I lived on Archer Way for about seven or eight years. Stevie Nicks lived right down the street from me."

Midnight's plot bears similarities to the real-life circumstances of its star, in a way that suggests Vane was again mirroring art and life as he had in his experimental film *Friedrichs*. *Midnight* is embroiled in a bitter struggle with her ex-husband, Mr. B, who had also been her manager and the copyright to her screen persona. Says Vane, "Lynn Redgrave was married to this guy John Clark, there was a very nasty divorce. He was unfaithful to her with the man who was also the secretary. He had a chum with her. Lynn was so furious she kicked him out of her life, cut him off from all of her money. He had been her manager, pettedness, the way I heard."

Vane feels that he got top dollar from Redgrave: "Lynn is terrific, in fact it is really her best performance ever on film. Many people have said this, but you judge for yourself. Lynn and I are not very friendly because the shooting was difficult. We had a lot of fights. There was a scene in a cellar where the body was hidden and I wanted to cut it down to about seven or eight takes, there were about twenty takes, she said if you cut that I'm not gonna do it, she wouldn't come out of her trailer. So I knocked on the door and said 'Look, Lynn, come out, we'll do it your way. But you have to understand that when I get in the editing room I

can cut it all out, so I'm just trying to save a lot of film now. It's just too stinky, we don't need all those words. I wrote them, now I wanna take them out! But if you wanna say 'em, you say 'em, and if they're terrific and I'm wrong, they'll be in. And that finally mollified her. She was very funny at times. In the restaurant scene I remember we were slow in getting started and she yelled, 'If we do this in two takes, I'm gonna fuck Norman Thaddeus Vane!' And I said, 'I'm gonna hold you to it, too.'

There were conflicts too with Tony Curtis, although the two men got on well. Vane found Curtis's propensity for improvising easy to deal with, perhaps as a result of his own improvisational experiments on *Fledglings*. "Tony Curtis is a great actor who requires very little direction. As a director, I like to improvise, he'll go all over the place. I said to him, 'I like your mind if you go off and improvise, but you got to come back to the cue line, because if you don't the others don't know when to come in.' One scene called for the veteran Hollywood legend, then in his late sixties, to be hoisted into the air by a noose round his neck, in reality of course, with a harness, to stage the execution of a hanging. Says Vane: 'When we hung him it was on a Saturday night, we were in Raleigh Studios, on Melrose here in Hollywood. We had a big soundstage for the day, but we had parking problems, make-up problems, people were fucking up: by the time we were ready to hang him it was after midnight. So he pulled me aside before the shot and said, 'Listen, I hate to tell you this but we're in Sunday, so it's double time, and I'm getting twenty thousand a day, so if you do this shot now, you owe me forty thousand.' So I took him for a walk and said, 'Tony, don't do this to me. There's no way I can pay you forty thousand. We're over budget now, I've lost pretty much all my director's salary, there's a penalty with the completion bond people so if we go over budget it comes out of my salary. The only money I'm even getting off this movie is as the writer and part of being the producer. If you do this to me then I take my writer's salary too!' So he said, 'Well, I don't know. I'm just sticking to the rules and it's now Sunday.' So I said, 'Tony, don't do this to me, spread it over town and you'll have a real problem working again. If you do this in a small town, Don't do it please. Beg you. And he didn't.'

Vane's difficulties with Redgrave continued into post-production. He recalls, "Lynn did not show up for the dubbing. I had to dub a full day. Five or six hours, it's quite expensive, usually about five hundred dollars an hour. We were all set to go and there was a miscommunication and she didn't show, so I got another girl who could do an English accent and she did Lynn's voice quite well, so it kinda worked out okay. The completion bond company made me sue Lynn for two or three thousand dollars, she won the dubbing. We won the first time, but she took my amazement and won the appeal. She kept telling the judge about her long and distinguished theatrical family, her sister, her father Michael and so on, and he was so impressed that he reversed the original ruling. The fact was she just didn't show up for the dubbing and we had notified her many times and a lot of money went down the drain.

Vane completed his preferred cut of the film, but it did not go down well with the Sony executives. For its eventual video release, the film was cut down by nearly ten minutes. Vane explains, "They decimated Lynn's scenes, cutting out most of the best ones. Gloria Morrison, the executive producer, said the reason she did this was because she wanted to get another deal with Sony and would do anything to get it, including destroying the movie, which she did. For

More Than A Time Of Night The Time When Comedy Turns To Fright

Lynn Redgrave Is...

Midnight

A Devilish Comedy



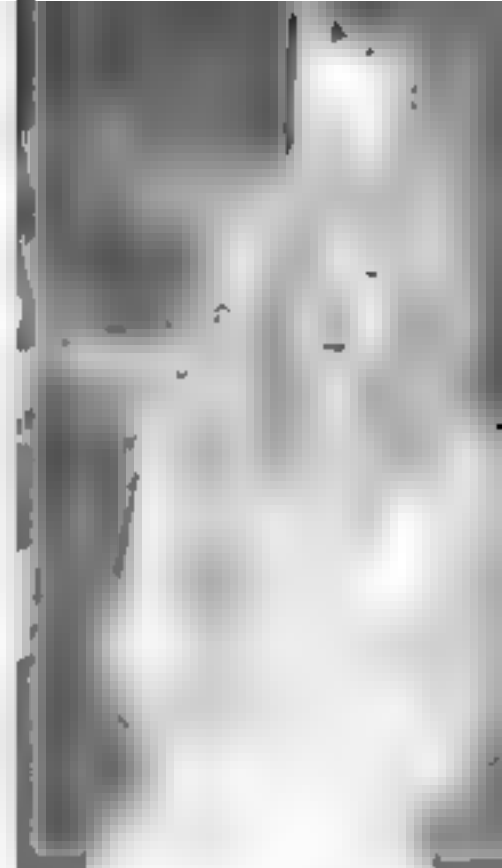
this day she doesn't understand the damage she did sending the negative back to New York to the distributors to cut up like a herring. The editor and I were broken-hearted. The distributor was a foreign sales guy in charge of Sony, a total idiot. He insisted, in order to sell the film to foreign markets on cutting out four or five of Lynn's best scenes, her emotional scenes, the love story.

Midnight did at least receive a limited theatrical engagement. "I showed it at The Royal, a very nice prestigious theatre here," says Vane. "We showed it there at midnight and that was the best I could get out of it theatrically." There were even a few positive notices, such as this from the *Los Angeles Times*: "The film is fascinating for going over the top so totally, so deliciously in every way possible."

Taxi Dancers and After

Pills are bitter, rope can give, jumping is scary, fuck it. I'll live. Sparkie, Taxi Drivers

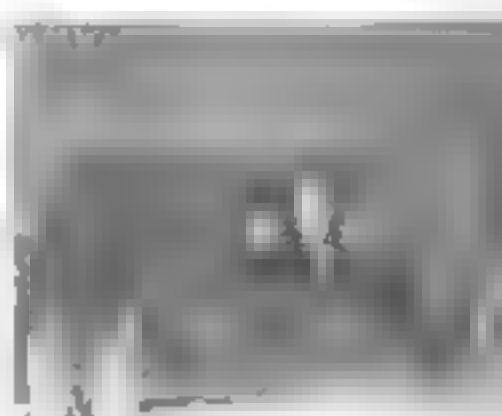
Dorothy Parker's words, updated for the early nineties, are as brilliantly cynical as ever, but Dorothy never had to sit through *Taxi Dancers*. By a long way the worst film in Vane's career this is the sort of movie Joe Eszterhas must have been watching on late-night cable when he wrote *Showgirls*, but only *Taxi Dancers* had one-hundredth of that film's energy. Waterlogged in soulless muzak, inertial to the point of coma, it hovers around the idea of sexy lapdancers without ever getting close to the action. Like a cheapskate painter with nothing but five dollars in his pocket and a wish to waste time. Beneath the sexy trappings is a clear warning that this is prostitution and thus 'a bad thing' for a gal to get into which may or may not be true, but is hardly enough dramatic meat to hang your hat on. A host of averagely pretty chicks strike up relationships with a handful of averagely handsome guys, while being menaced by two of the cinema's least convincing hoods (and boy is that crown contested...). Meanwhile, the more conventional characters (for such drives the ugly rich) are conspicuous by their absence. Seemingly built around the availability of a genuine L.A. nightclub, *Taxi Dancers* is supposed to offer visually except the tired glitz of an off-duty bar. Only Robert Miano as the bar owner suggests he might be capable of delivering something better, as for the rest, supporting roles in *Red Shoe Diaries* would seem about

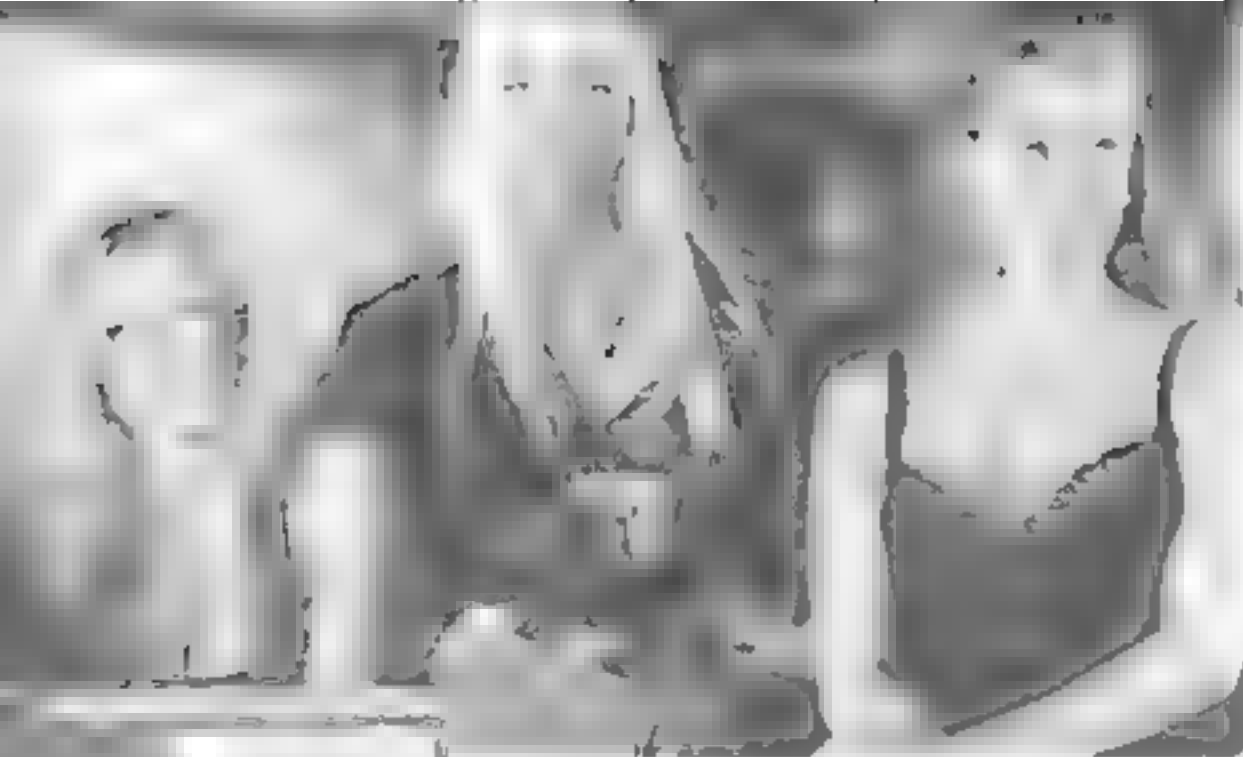


Missy Angel Karen W.
Mickey Modine away



Midnight makes a perso





commit. It's all a long way from the experimental drive of Vane's early work, and lacks either the exploitation verve of *The Black Room* or the idiosyncratic genre awareness of *The Horror Star* and *Midnight*.

Unfortunately, so far it has proved to be the last Norman Thaddeus Vane movie to reach our screens. Not that the director, now in his seventies, has given up trying. "At the moment, I'm working on a story called *The Magical Pomes*, which is in the Harry Potter genre. It was a near miss at Dreamworks. They had lunch and meetings on it and passed probably because I'm with a small agency now and not with William Morris, as I was for twelve to fifteen years. When my agent there, Bill Hart, got fired they dropped me too. My best shot at a production at this point is a political thriller called *Cuba Libre* which is with a lady producer in Florida who has a lot of contacts. I will be the writer on this one and also one of the producers, but will not be directing, although I should. Then there's *The Room*, with Tapestry Films currently, I wrote it as a book, which is awaiting publication. A real horror film: I'm hoping to interest Lynn Redgrave. It's about a cult in Hollywood. A young girl who was a former member of the cult has an affair with a New York writer who moves out to L.A. She goes back to the cult, is murdered, and comes back as a spirit and kills all the members of the cult."

Stop Press: As of spring 2007 Vane is due to start shooting a horror comedy called *You're So Dead*, starring teen heartthrob Nick Carter of The Backstreet Boys! The story concerns a cemetery where the dead are able to take over the bodies of unwary visitors. Maybe there is yet another chapter to be added to Norman Thaddeus Vane's horror legacy!

1 Rachman, a Polish Jew who fled the Nazis and came to Britain during the war, became notorious for a scam in which he would buy dilapidated properties where sitting tenants paid fixed rents, then use intimidation tactics, such as moving deliberately rowdy neighbours into adjacent rooms, to drive them out; after which, thanks to a conservative housing policy in the late fifties, he was free to increase rents as high as he liked. He would cram West Indian immigrants into the properties and charge them extortionate amounts for the privilege and since black people at the time faced frequent racism from property-owners, they were stuck with him. Rachman was Vane's landlord at La Duchesne, and it was only when Rachman ran into the Kays in 1960 that he met his match. In an ambush the Kays extorted from the extortionist, setting their heavens on Rachman's thugs. As an emolument, Rachman sold the club 'smear' to the Kays, although he didn't actually own it simply steamrollered Stefan de Hays (the actual owner at the time) into giving up. Rachman died in 1962 of a heart attack, the timing of which not many to suspect that he had taken his own death and absconded.

2 Reported to the *London Evening News* at the time as £5,000

3 The whole thing gained an extra dimension when transgressive censorship went mainstream in the 1990s, leading to a hideous brand of all-start-and-no-punk 'eroticism' that had more to do with making freaky in nightclubs than anything approaching the bedroom.

4 Vampire was born in Finland.

5 How twisted is it that while movie after movie wants the leading lady to go topless or nude, as soon as she pulls out her breast to feed a baby the deal is off.

NORMAN THADDEUS VANE'S FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

The Horror Star (1960)

The Black Room (1961)

The Room (1962)

The Horror Star (1963)

The Horror Star (1964)

The Horror Star (1965)

The Horror Star (1966)

The Horror Star (1967)

The Horror Star (1968) Daughter (writer)

The Horror Star (1969)

The Horror Star (1970)

The Horror Star (1971)

The Horror Star (1972)

The Horror Star (1973)

The Horror Star (1974)

The Horror Star (1975)

The Horror Star (1976)

NORMAN THADDEUS VANE'S FILMOGRAPHY AS ACTOR

The Horror Star (1960)

The Black Room (1961)

The Room (1962)

The Horror Star (1963)

The Horror Star (1964)

The Horror Star (1965)

The Horror Star (1966)

The Horror Star (1967)

The Horror Star (1968)

The Horror Star (1969)

The Horror Star (1970)

The Horror Star (1971)

The Horror Star (1972)

The Horror Star (1973)

The Horror Star (1974)

The Horror Star (1975)

The Horror Star (1976)

Raising The Child

by Rosalind Wiseman and Robert D. Lefkowitz

The Child 1976

As hired as governess for Rosalie Nordon (Rosalie Cole), a little girl who lives with her father Joshua (Frank Janson) and older brother Len (Richard Hanners) in a remote house in the woods. There's something a little odd about the Nordons. Rosalie's mother died recently in mysterious circumstances. Joshua Nordon is off his rocker, and strange little Rosalie herself is in contact with zombie-like creatures who live in the cemetery. As kind-hearted Alerianne tries to reach out to the child, Rosalie demonstrates psychic powers, summoning "friends" from the graveyard to do her bidding. First to suffer Rosalie's wrath is nosy neighbour Mrs. Whitfield (Ruth Bajan), followed by a thieving gardener (Slosson Bing Long). Finally, Rosalie turns her attentions on Alerianne, who must flee for her life as the zombies attack.

If like me, you're a sucker for off-the-wall horror movies, *The Child* is a real treat. It has a beguilingly deranged amateur feel, unleashing a cache of scary cadavers in the last twenty minutes and packing the rest of the running time with strange music, wild camera angles and warped acting. It has that unpredictable quality you find in the best seventies exploitation, where weird digressions and *non sequiturs* lurk at every turn. For instance Mrs. Whitfield, the old lady who lives near the Nordons, and who by rights should be a peripheral figure, exceeds the mundanity of her role thanks to Ruth Bajan's eccentric performance. Some might call her terrible, but for me her stilted line readings help to loosen the viewer's grip on reality, so that the camera, tilting and weaving like a sick sailor, can send you sliding into oceanic disorientation. As you fall, you'll perhaps hear music that sounds like Liberace playing, or Bela Lugosi's stage show, accompanied by the wounded shrieks of a synthesizer. If so don't worry, it'll pass; just relax and enjoy it.

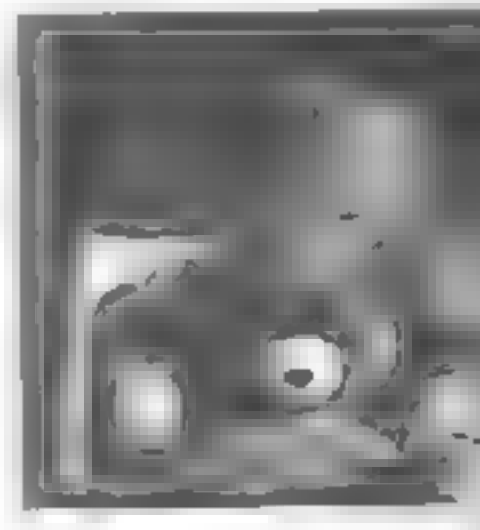
The score by Rob Wallace and synth rocker Michele Quatro nurtures *The Child's* strange aura from beginning to end. Wallace's lush, overly-dramatic piano arrangement (like a cross between the *Love Story* theme and Carlo Rustichelli's music for Mario Bava's *The Whip and the Body*) sounds freakish next to Quatro's ancient synthesizer with its primitive swoops and snorts. The effect is of a bodice-ripping melodrama being invaded by creeping

synthesis. When the smoke machine kicks in and the camera goes Dutch, so too the music cuts loose into free-form freak-out, not unlike the more extreme Morricone recordings. The combined effect is a heady brew of experiment and cliché, amateur and avant-garde. The acting further contributes to the film's unstable energy: the "bad" actors are not simply wooden or inexpressive, they're if anything *too* expressive, too broad and emphatic. The instability of the performances is heightened by extensive use of post-synch dubbing, adding an extra layer of dislocation.

We're carried along like this for nearly forty minutes without really understanding what *The Child* is about. It's just a fever dream and refuses to become a normal movie. You feel immersed, like poor Alerianne staggering through the foggy woods at the start of the film, but to what end and in what dramatic current is unclear. Plot and characterisation are minimal at best. Alerianne has problems in her past ("The death of parents when a child is very young... it leaves you feeling so alone") but we don't hear too much about them. She's troubled enough to sympathise with creepy, unfriendly Rosalie, and that's all we need to know: it explains why she doesn't just bolt for the next train out of town. But much of the back-story remains abstract. Rosalie's mother was robbed and killed, Len explains, possibly by tramps. Rosalie tells Alerianne that her mother was fascinated by the powers of the mind, which suggests a flair for the paranormal passed from mother to daughter. These comments are almost thrown away, and the film is as little better for it. Writers often tell the viewer too much, and *The Child* is no exception. Alerianne is drawn into the Nordons' crazy lives and departs at the end of the movie really none the wiser, just a great deal more frightened. It's not storytelling but disorientation that is the key to the film's pleasures. When we're thrown the curveball of telepathic empathy between a child and the denizens of the local graveyard, we're inclined to accept this insane idea: not because it's coherently elaborated, but because we've been lost in the fog for so long we're ready to believe anything. This brand of straight-faced narrative absurdity is something I particularly like, maddening though it may be to students of the dramatic arts. *The Child's* disconcerting oneiric shiver is intimately bound up in its lack of sense.

Admittedly, there's not a lot going on at a thematic level, at least nothing I can put my finger on. I've

Rosalie (Rosalie Cole) grows at the new arrival in *The Child*. Robert J. Ross and's delirious bee seed horror story.



earnestly trowled the subtext and still can't find a sideways comment on Vietnam, the Kennedy assassination, Nixon's impeachment, or the fuel crisis. So much for horror as social commentary. It's possible that the name Rose is Norton was intended by writer Ralph Lucas as an allusion to the occultist and painter Rose Marie Norton, but the significance is minimal. The script breeds *Night of the Living Dead* with the possessed child of *The Exorcist* (although it pre-dates *Carrie* and *The Omen*) and operates almost entirely as a horror amalgum; and yet for me there's a fascination beyond the sum of the parts. The movie makes a virtue of its cheapness and its variable acting, while adding truly bizarre and imaginative images, like the scene in which Aliceanne dreams she's dancing in the graveyard with a scarecrow. We're not even sure quite where we are in time. The old cars Aliceanne and Mrs. Whitfield drive suggest the 1940s or '50s, and Aliceanne's occupation reminds us of Henry James's celebrated 1897 novella *The Turn of the Screw*. Like the neurotic narrator of James's tale, however, Laurel Barnett's Aliceanne is a gentle innocent: in fact she's rather more like Rosie Hololet's unfortunate Nurse Beale in S.F. Brownrigg's *Don't Look in the Basement*. Her lack of worldliness or cynicism makes her more child-like than the child herself. Rosalie, on the other hand, has a slyness and sense of mockery beyond her age: like *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Child* taps into paranoid fears about the secret malice of children. Fortunately, Aliceanne finds an ally and a witness to the horrors. Not for her the Jamesian burden of proving that her young charge has been corrupted. Rose's brother sees the monsters attack, and accompanies the terrorized teacher in his flight from the undead. The plotless misadventure is at last, and the story suddenly jumps into fourth gear, adopting a chase and escape format. A gentleman's word of warning, though: if you prefer proactive females, the sort who are unfazed by blood, horror and violence, you will have to look elsewhere for your Amazonian jollies. Aliceanne proves to be an ankle-twisting hysteric in the grand old tradition (in fact Barnett's frantic screams suggest that Voskanian was looking to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* for inspiration).

The Child climaxes with a siege, as Aliceanne and Len seek refuge from the zombies in an old industrial building. It's a blatant steal from *Night of the Living Dead*, with an added kick – the couple find their bolt-hole attacked, not just on all sides, but through the floor as well (Romero's film reserved the cellar as sanctuary). It is essential that a zombie film should come to this, with humans barricading themselves ineffectually against a relentless barrage of the living dead. Hands reaching blindly through boarded-up windows where the living huddle inside is an image of nightmare clarity, and although it was originated by George Romero it's well worth recycling. If you going to steal, steal from the best. *The Child* may not stand as tall as Romero's formidable *Night of the Living Dead*, but I can think of few other examples of why the independent US horror scene worth investigating. Yes, *The Child* is illogical, it trails loose ends like spaghetti, it's not "about" anything important. But by hook or unconscious crook, Robert Voskanian, Bob Dadashian and Ralph Lucas created a film of twinge lunacy, one that – for all its cheap and cheerful production values – is soaked in the borderless confusion of dreams.



"I was really surprised to learn that there are still people like yourself who remember my movie." Robert Voskanian

The otherworldly weirdness of *The Child* seems to exist outside of time, and it's difficult, at least at first, to imagine what its makers might be doing today. As it turns out, both director Robert Voskanian and producer Robert Dadashian are very comfortably ensconced in the real world.

Voskanian is currently the owner of The Stock Exchange, a nightclub in Los Angeles. The building was originally built by Italian sculptor Salvatore Carraro Scarpitta in 1929 to house the Los Angeles Stock Exchange; it closed during the Great Depression in 1931. Voskanian bought the building in 1997 and made his mark immediately: for instance, he designed the club to be entered not through the front, but through the back doors, via an alley, a deliberate style choice inspired by several classic New York nightclubs. Inside too, he made his own mark, having designed the interior of every club he's owned. He has been active in the nightclub business since leaving college, when a friend offered him a partnership to purchase a club on the Westside of L.A., called Bootleggers. He learned the business fast, and soon expanded his domain, approaching the management of the prestigious Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles with a proposal to establish a nightclub there too. Recently, he has signed a long-term lease for the Million Dollar Theatre, built in 1918 on L.A.'s South Broadway. He plans to book concerts and theatre productions, and turn the lobby into a cafe.

Dadashian has remained attached to the film industry, as a post-production supervisor for Family Home Entertainment (added to Artisan Entertainment), overseeing picture and sound editing, and graphic design. Both men were happy to discuss their one and only entry into the horror film history books.

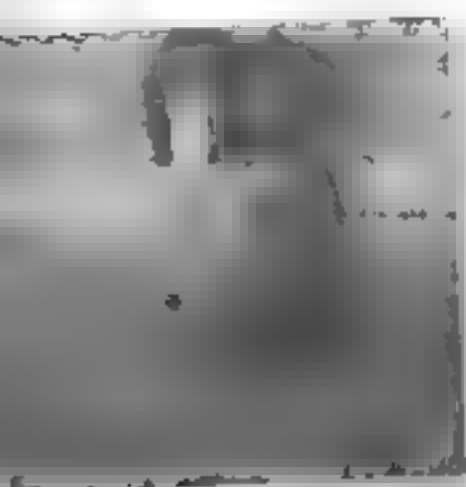
Parents

Robert Voskanian was born in Tehran in the 1940s. His mother and father were Armenian but moved to Iran shortly before he was born. "We were Christian, so we had our own school, church and our own community," he says, "but in general Persians respected us and let us do our own stuff. Voskanian's father was in the cargo trucking business, and his uncle on his mother's side was the noted Armenian artist Arak Vasken, whose intriguing semi-geometric paintings hover between abstraction and figuration. "Actually he was not a painter 'til later on in his life," Voskanian recalls. "As a kid he was a genius, in fact he was so good that the Iranian government sent him to France to learn mathematics. After he graduated he went back to Iran for a short period of time, then moved to France, where he became a professor."

After graduating from high school in Tehran, the seventeen-year-old Voskanian moved with his family to America, arriving first in New York and then heading for California. In Los Angeles county he enrolled first at Whittier College to study business, then joined Columbia

The Child

by maestro Michael Quattro



college in Hollywood, as a Film Major. It was there that he hooked up with Robert Dadashian, forging a friendship that would lead to the making of *The Child*. "I met Bob Dadashian while I was going to Columbia. We became good friends, and after we graduated we formed a small company called Panorama Films. We did a few little projects here and there, and of course Panorama Films was not making much money, so I had to get another job in order to pay my bills, as I was married then. The film school was good at its time, it was more of a hands-on place. We always had small projects happening that we used to shoot on campus. At Panorama Film we made a couple of short, training films, and also edited twenty minutes of documentaries for Yamaha International, but there wasn't enough income so I had to get another job working for Oak of America.

Robert Dadashian, producer of *The Child*, was born in Armenia in 1946. His family moved to the United States in 1950, settling first in Philadelphia, then moving west to Los Angeles. The young Robert was quickly drawn to the cinema by the early low-budget horror films of William Castle and Roger Corman. "What fascinated me was the ability to make films on a low budget that were surprisingly well done," he says. "I always knew that I would pursue a career in the film industry. I attended Columbia College in Hollywood in 1966. I was fortunate to be taught by experienced teachers who were actively working in the motion picture industry. Years later, I returned to Columbia to teach motion picture editing. I met Robert Voskanian there; he discovered that the two were of the same ethnic origin (although German by birth, Dadashian is an Armenian name). "This brought us together," he explains, "but most importantly we had common goals and interests. Working with him was very comfortable, and whenever conflicts occurred they were quickly resolved."

After leaving Columbia, Dadashian worked as a film editor at Warren Miller Enterprises, producing documentaries on skiing and surfing. When he and Voskanian set up Panorama Films, they had hoped to become self-sufficient, but the training film and corporate documentary market was already jam-packed. If the two friends were to make a mark they would have to do more than scratch a living on documentaries. It was time to consider building a cinematic career on their own.

Conception

While hovering at the fringes of the film industry, Voskanian and Dadashian noticed a small black-and-white horror flick that was making waves despite its low budget. As Voskanian recalls, "While we were at film school there was a movie out called *Night of the Living Dead*, which had a lot of noise; everybody was talking about how some guys from somewhere in the Midwest made this movie a big success, with very little money. After Bob and I saw this we told ourselves we too could make an independent low-budget movie, and we decided that a horror movie was the best choice. We put an ad in *The Hollywood Reporter* for a horror movie script, and we had lots of replies. One that got our attention was a screenplay by Ralph Lucas called 'Children of the Night.' Bob and I liked the script. The next day we called Ralph, and told him that we liked his screenplay and we wanted to make it into a movie. But we could not pay him up front - instead we offered him a percentage of the film. He agreed.

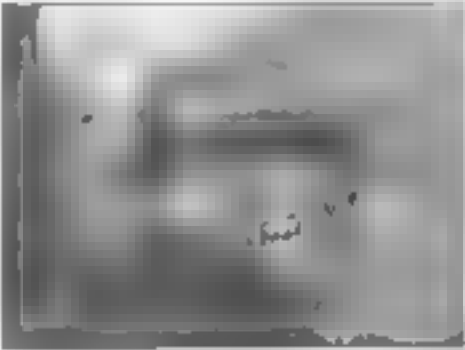
Making The Child



Robert Dadashian expands on what he and Voskanian saw in Lucas's script: "Ralph Lucas was a serious artist, a hard worker and very reliable. He always came through with the rewrites and always met deadlines. What drew me to the theme was the plot from the film *The Exorcist*. As I can recall, in *The Exorcist* a little girl was possessed by the Devil. I tried to modify the same theme by having a young girl overcome by telekinesis. The little girl in our film utilizes her powers to avenge her mother's death. She controls zombies through telekinesis. With a script in hand, the next step was to look for a good cinematographer. Voskanian called Mori Alavi, a friend from film school, who agreed to shoot the movie.

above: Classic pose for the title

below: One of the zombies



under the same terms as Ralph Lucas. "From there explains Voskanian, "we put more ads in *The Hollywood Reporter* asking for a cast to act in a low-budget horror movie without pay, against part ownership of the movie. We were able to put our movie together without any upfront money to the cast or the crew. At the same time, we put budget together for raw stock, lab work, equipment rentals and so on, and we asked our family and friends to help us produce the movie. We were fortunate enough to raise money to start the production this way.

Gestation

The Child was apparently shot during 1973 and 1974 for around \$30,000 at several locations in Los Angeles, Culver City, Boyle Heights and Montebello. I say "apparently" because, unfortunately for those seeking to pin down the exact chronology of the production, both Robert Dadashian and Robert Voskanian are extremely vague about dates. The onscreen copyright date for *The Child* is 1976, however, in the book *Goats in Polyester* lead actress Laurel Harrett speaks confidently about *The Child*, claiming that it started shooting in late 1973 and continued throughout 1974. Even when we consider that Voskanian and Dadashian began showing their finished work to potential distributors in 1976, it would still seem that *The Child* went through rather a long gestation. Voskanian is puzzled by this: "I really don't remember the dates. I am almost positive it didn't take us from '73 to '76 to finish the film but why the hell I can't recall."

Voskanian does recall the circumstances of the locations and shooting. "Most of the interiors were shot in a house that was built around the early 1920s and was at that time the property of the city of Los Angeles. We talked to the housing department and they told us they were planning to demolish and build low cost rental housing there. We asked them if they would let us shoot our movie inside the house without a fee as we did not have much of a budget. They agreed. If we would provide them with liability insurance, which we did. Some of the other interiors were shot at Bob Dadashian's parents' house. For our exterior shots there was a huge oil field that was the property of Standard Oil Company. We approached them, told them that we were shooting a student film, and asked if they would be kind enough to let us use their property. They agreed and gave us permission to shoot on their oil fields. It was a great opportunity because on their property was this old house, which we used as the exterior of the Nordon house. A lot of trees and bushes that we were able to use for the cemetery and other exterior shots."

Voskanian and Dadashian prepared the shoot rigorously to stay within their means. Voskanian remembers, "When we got the okay from Ralph for his screenplay, we made a production board in order to come up with a shooting schedule and also rentals and ultimately shooting budget. When it came to doing the shooting on a day-to-day basis, I transferred all the scenes onto four-by-six inch cards and that's how I knew which scenes I was shooting. I had a card for every scene I had to shoot."

I asked Voskanian what aspects of the filmmaking process he was most involved with during the shoot. He was very much involved with camera angles and the general mood of the film, with both the technical and also the performing end of it. "It's a matter of fact all hand-held shots were shot by me with a second camera, with Mori shooting

Dadashian adds "Mr. Alavi was from Iran and he had an avant-garde flare for costume design. He enhanced our film."

The cast's abilities vary wildly, although much of this is to the film's advantage when it comes to establishing an eerie mood. Voskanian admits, "Our cast was mostly amateur because no professional would work in a movie without getting paid. The one with the most experience was Frank Janson. I had fun working with him, he was easy going and followed direction fairly well. The one person I had a lot of problems with was Ruth Ballan. She was originally a stage actress and when she started acting in the movie, she was acting as if she was on the stage, exaggerating every scene. I had to slow her down, and constantly remind her that there are close-up shots in the film, or when you walk, walk naturally, you don't have to project things, the camera will pick it for you. Even though Rosane Cole had never acted before I had an easy time with her, I think she followed direction well and with some training she probably could have been a good little actress. Laurel Harrett had done some stage acting before and from time to time I also had to remind her that she was in front of a camera, not on the stage, but overall was not difficult to work with. Richard Hanners was a quiet person and that was reflected in his acting. Slosson Ring long was a classmate of ours, I don't remember where was he from. After the movie was finished, I only saw Rosane once, and Richard twice. The last time I saw Richard he told me that he was giving up acting and moving to Washington state. I also saw Laurel Harrett on television once (she had a small part on a TV show). Mori Alavi moved back to Iran. You remember at the end of the movie we had a lot of names listed as crew, but there was no crew - we made up those names! The crew was me, Bob Dadashian, Mori Alavi, maybe a few other people helping us, just because they were on a movie set! Ralph Lucas too, he was a nice person. I helped as a lot during the shooting, mostly keeping track of the dialog continuity. We met [special effects designer] Owens through a friend, he was getting divorced and he didn't have anywhere to stay, so we let him sleep in our office temporarily. He claimed that he could do the make-up for the zombies and also the special effects. Me and Robert not having anybody for our special effects, agreed to his proposal and it turned out that, for the budget we had, I did a fairly good job. Every zombie took about a couple of hours to do, we usually scheduled the zombie shoots at the end of our day. The movie was supposedly set in the 1950s, but we didn't have an art director or any custom design, so we spent some money to the cast and let them buy their own clothes. The crew wore what they had available."

After completing the shoot, the two friends were completely out of money, as Voskanian recalls: "Bob started to edit, and we got all the way to a work print and a dialogue track, at which point we started to show the movie as a dual projection system, meaning at one side was the work print and at the other the dialogue track. Perhaps 10 or three people looked at it, and Harry Novak was the one who liked the movie - he said he would forward the movie to finish the film and would distribute it too. At that time we were very happy that our movie was going to be finished and was going to play in the theatres. Not being business-minded at that time we didn't pay great attention to our contract. We were just happy that our film was going to be released. We put another ad in *The Hollywood Reporter* for a couple of weeks to do our music track and met [composer] Rob Wallace."

Dodashian remembers that “Wa face had access to Michael Quatro, who did the opening theme to *Rollerball*. He was very proficient in synthesizer music. Quatro and Wallace collaborated to achieve the most fitting score. Dodashian however has mixed feelings about the result. “In the beginning I liked his music but I was not happy with the finished soundtrack. But Harry Novak said he thought the music was fine so I had to agree with him.”

School (Hard Knocks)

Harry Novak quickly changed the title – the movie from *Men of the Night* to *The Child*, and in 1977 the movie hit last bit theatres, Voskarian recalls. “The movie played in approximately 1,200 to 1,300 theatres all over the United States. I never saw it as a feature. I guess I didn’t have the nerve to see it with the general public. I went to a few theatres and watched people going inside, but I never went in.” The movie did okay, but when the monies started coming in to Boxoffice International we found out that, per our contract, we had a very small cut of that income. We never made any money, and we were only able to pay part

of the money back to our investors. If I knew what I know now, I don't think we would try to make a different distribution deal than we made here; but then again, unless you have a solid project, or you have a name, they would take you for a ride, so you should consider the deal as a stepping stone. I understand why it's frustrating. My experience with Warner Bros. is frustrating. I feel that we never received a fair shake. Distribution was a nightmare. The producer reports that we received were from regions that were small payoffs. We never received reports from the larger regions that obviously earned more. The film played throughout the United States and Europe to the teen market.

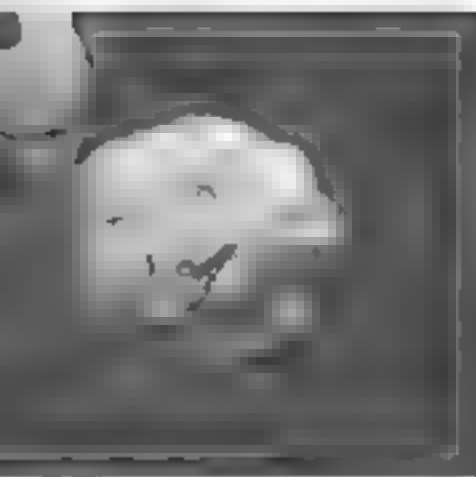
The film was commercially marketed well. James Brown, the director of *Don't Go in the Woods* and sound effects editor on *The Child*, remembers the genesis of the iconic, much reproduced artwork for Harry Novak's release campaign: "The Child's artwork was done by Rocky Schenck, who followed Bill Paxson (*Twister*) from Texas to L.A., where they both worked for Peter Jackson." Bob Versharian and Bob Dadashian connected with Rocky Schenck at Brunswick A [Bryan's post-production house] by means of my introduction.

Mrs. Whitfield (R-4) S
Rose playing
A little story
Leon Richard Hanners
Alphonse
Rose

15. $\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4}$



Raising The Child



5. 4. 1. 8 added to

4. 4. 1. 8 well

4. 4. 1. 8



So is Voskanian pleased with the movie, in retrospect? Yes, and I will tell you why. I've read lots of comments that different people wrote about *The Child*; the majority of them knocked the film and made fun of the cast and even the director, but the majority of them, at the end of their comments, said "I liked it" or "I recommend you to see it." Someone even wrote they'd like to see a remake of *The Child*. As the director of the movie, I know what went wrong: we simply did not have enough money to make a good movie." Dadashian says: "I was very pleased with the end result because it reflected all of our work. *The Child* helped form a few alliances. It helped me get a job as a post production supervisor at Family Home Entertainment, who were the first video distributors of the film."

Sadly for fans of *The Child*, the trio of Voskanian, Dadashian and Lucas never worked on another feature together. Lucas clocked a few more screen credits: he wrote a screenplay for *Planet of Dinosaurs* (1978) by James H. Shea, with stop-motion effects by Doug Beswick; adapted *Zipperface* (1992), a comic murder-thriller by Mansour Pournouri; and wrote the screen treatment for *The Boys of Cellblock Q* (1992), a gay-themed prison drama adapted by Lucas from a stage play of the same name.

Robert Dadashian worked as sound editor on several features, including Richard Sarafian's *Street Justice* (1989), the David Duchovny back-catalogue entry *Julia Has Two Lovers* (1991), erotica specialist Philippe Blot's *Born Wild* (1995), and *The Sweeper* (1996), by the indefatigable Joseph Merhi. James Brvan also recalls that Bob Dadashian edited his sci-fi comedy *Sex 4 Girls* (1987). Dadashian is now a back-room boy, working post on numerous productions for Family Home Entertainment.

Robert Voskanian still harbours a desire to direct again, so we must hope and pray he gets the chance. "At the present time I'm into the nightclub business, but at the same

time I'm writing a horror/suspense thriller called *The Sea* - hopefully I will be able to make it into a movie sometime in the future. The film is a suspense thriller of which takes place underwater. It's a survival game between some recreational wreck divers, as they come to face with a group of killer divers inside a sunken ship sunk by the U.S. coast guard (of course there is a lot happening than this one line!)"

Voskanian's art directing career stretches from *Crash Test Evil* (1978), to Victor Salva's *Jeepers* (1999), to *The*

ROBERT VOSKANIAN: FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

1978 *Crash Test Evil* (art director)

ROBERT DADASHIAN: FILMOGRAPHY

1978 *Crash Test Evil* (art director)

1987 *Sex 4 Girls* (editor)

1989 *Street Justice* (sound editor)

1991 *Julia Has Two Lovers* (sound editor)

1992 *The Boys of Cellblock Q* (screenplay)

1992 *Zipperface* (screenplay)

1995 *Born Wild* (screenplay)

1996 *The Sweeper* (screenplay)

1999 *Jeepers* (art director)



dead

Who's the Ghostest with the Mostest?

The Films of Fredric Hobbs

Troika (1969)

"Where Fellini is deified, Kenneth Anger respected, and *Indelusum Dog* considered a classic, Hobbs will be hailed as a genius. Squarer technicians will acknowledge him as a big spender, a wild but talented modern artist, set decorator, costumer and sculptor, a disciplined film craftsman, not a bad comedy director, and possibly mad as a hatter." *Variety*, Nov 1969

"An apocalyptic fantasy that creates a sustained crescendo of extraordinary intensity." *San Francisco Chronicle*

There's little to prepare you for *Troika*, an extraordinary piece of art that comes straight out of left field. It's variously a wild and weird exercise in symbolism, a glimpse of late sixties political foment, and a visit to another world. Along the way it provides a humorous portrait of Hobbs himself, and a sardonic commentary on the processes that stand in the way of making art cinema in a country more routinely interested in popcorn entertainment.

Okay, so this intro sounds a little grandiose. But *Troika* particularly in its extended third movement, comes at you with banners fluttering, a phalanx of mysterious heraldry, and the pomp of atten orchestras blaring it. No wonder you reel away at the end, straining for superlatives. So to let the mist and madness subside and the mind refine its bearings, what exactly is *Troika*?

To begin with, it's a film about creation. The first thing we see is a brightly lit blank canvas, maybe ten feet square, occupying the entire field of vision. Into the frame comes Hobbs himself, striding with coiled yet calm purpose to the centre of the screen. With swift and steady application he attacks the canvas, pulling from the nothingness a shape and form, a violent tableau. A female figure reclines against nothingness, extending an arm from which hang faces and forms of flayed humanity. A bird (an owl?) sits triumphantly astride the extended arm, above the horrors dangling below. It's partly a quotation of Goya's 'Great Deeds! Against the Dead' (one of his 'Disasters of War' series), but it's very Hobbs, and it's also a magnificent *coup de théâtre*, a fantastical painting produced in real time before our eyes. Picasso

had a reputation for similarly rapid work (and Rolf Harris of course), but with the camera rolling and film being so expensive the scene demonstrates Hobbs's absolute confidence in his ability. You can't help but be impressed by such a clear statement of intent – and it's also an inspired way of suggesting that the film should be considered – as one with Hobbs's fine art endeavours.

Troika ('a group of three' in Russian) then develops into three individual short films, set within a framework which charts the encounters of filmmaker Fredric Hobbs (playing himself) with a Hollywood producer – one 'Gordon Goodloins' (Richard Faun). After his telephone calls are ignored, Hobbs leaps from the bushes and literally rugby-tackles the wealthy Goodloins in his own driveway. Thus girded, he relents and grants Hobbs a conversation. The two men sit in the bath together discussing cinema's relationship to art and life, while a mariachi band, also crammed into the bathroom (and led by Carlos Santana's father, Jose), plays along. Goodloins suggests that Hobbs's dreams of art cinema are unrealistic when set against the tastes of the general public. "Do you know how many movie theatres there are in this country?" he sneers. "Do you know how

Hobbs (right) with William Heckes the "merc" and cinematographer at Hobbs's studio





Hobbs as The Chef in *Troika's* *The Chef*

A still from the movie *Troika*

A still from the movie *Troika*

A still from the movie *Troika*



many art museums there are? When they stop building movie theatres and start building art museums then Hobbs then talk to me about art." The conversation turns to the interests of youth audiences: Goodfours tells Hobbs he should modify his dreams by engaging with contemporary reality. "Grab the minds of the young people, Hobbs, and you grab six figures a year," he says (a theme that would reappear in *Alabama's Ghost*). Hobbs approaches Goodfours one last time, but he drives off in his limousine, dismissing art out of hand, dubbing it "garbage" and snapping, "Stop trying to feed garbage to popcorn eaters." What follows is the funniest image in Hobbs's cinema, as he chases the car down the street, running like crazy and waving his fist yelling, "Up yours, Mr. Goodfours!"

These talking scenes are amusing and cleverly scripted. They demonstrate the director's artistic self-consciousness and give him a soapbox from which to attack Hollywood small-mindedness, mock the high-life fakery of the establishment, and position himself as a visionary outsider. What saves all of this from self-aggrandizement is that Hobbs plays Hobbs without grandstanding; he acts more like an anxious private investigator than an artistic giant, which gives him great likeability. And when it comes to show-not-tell, his unique visual artistry requires no further hype.

Although the three shorts that comprise the majority of *Troika* have no onscreen names, they can loosely be referred to by the following titles, which Hobbs uses in conversation:

Film One: The Chef

The Chef plays out like an alchemical ritual, with a mad cook (Hobbs again), chef's hat on head, indulging some unimaginable culinary experiment. Hobbs, virtually unrecognisable under Aztec-styled face-paint and a bizarre, insect-nose like an insect's proboscis, throws various symbolically loaded items into a giant brass tank full of brown foam (actually a brewer's vat in a brewery). It seems at first as if the chef is enacting a kind of "creation/deconstruction of the self" set to a whimsical, surrealistic soundtrack not unlike the incidental music for The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*, or the later episodes of *The Prisoner*. If so, it's undertaken in a distinctly satirical vein, mocking either the sanctity of selfhood or the "deep and meaningful" processes of symbolic art itself (it makes you wonder what Hobbs would do with Alfred Jarry's absurdist *Ubu* plays). A stiff,

featureless homunculus made of clothes, its "face" entirely swathed in bandages (referencing, says Hobbs, the enigmatic "Soldier in White" in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*), is plundered for ingredients (three strips of Air Force decorations) and fed with bakelite shrapnel from smashed 78rpm records (on the prominently displayed "Vacation record label"). Not content with symbols alone, the chef then dances a tango with a heavily painted young woman before tossing her into the vat too. The rose she has held between her teeth is the last thing to go—the chef gazes at it sentimentally, then tosses it in anyway. A written text is brandished at the camera declaring that after the Emperor Nero, the US Air Force now holds the record for "kitchen flambé" giving an unmistakable whiff of Vietnam-era critique to the otherwise hermetic proceedings. As Hobbs himself served in the Air Force, the scene in which he tosses Air Force decorations into the vat can be seen as his symbolic disengagement with the military objectives of the era, and the whole thing can thus be said to double as a metaphor for US militarism. "I don't know what that one's really about," admits Hobbs when asked about *The Chef*, "except that it's an anti-war statement." Hobbs, who presides throughout the wide-angle weirdness ducking

and diving like a macabre children's entertainer, ends up inside the metal cauldron too, laughing like a lunatic, making this dense and rather disturbing piece feel like some Chinese-box depiction of madness. Hobbs suggests another reading, which is that the actions of the chef have all been predicated on destruction—all is consumed and destroyed until only self-annihilation or madness remain. In its ironic play with images of creation and destruction, its use of Air Force trimmings, and bearing in mind the self-consciousness of the wraparound scenes, I found myself looking for an autobiographical element (although Hobbs told me there was no intended significance to the fact he played the chef himself). Whatever the reading, Hobbs has the ground running with a genuinely bizarre and arresting short, photographed with startling clarity and invention by his regular DP William Itcock.

Film Two: Alma Mater

The second short film could be termed an "Expressionist documentary" about the student demonstrations of the late sixties. The sequence contains footage shot at a student sit-in, taken both inside the college amid tired or downcast students, and outside where the police amass threateningly on horseback. Hobbs, doing his best to coax out the implicit violence cinematically, intercuts between the vertiginous of the documentary footage and images from his own artworks, drawings with a Goyesque violence inspired by the infamous Kent State riots seen on TV as well as by the footage Hobbs himself shot (he confirmed to me that he drew some of the pictures before and others after the film shoot). This documentary passage (the marvellous drawn excepted) would fall into the "dull but worthy" category not for more of Hobbs's inventive Expressionist theatrics. In a white-walled space (defined as a schoolroom by a handful of props), a dunce-capped teacher bangs a gong after which a succession of more and more absurd lessons take place: one lecturer demonstrates a black inflatable beach-matress concealing a bevy of frogs and toads; and an economics class takes place before the painted legend "God Bless the Gnomes of Zurich!" (the "Gnomes of Zurich" being British Labour prime minister Harold Wilson's term for manipulative Swiss bankers). The surrealistic classroom dotted with toilet seats and *chaise-longues* instead of chairs is populated by students with thickly painted Caravaggio-esque faces who eventually boo the dunce-capped teacher out of class. Most impressively of all, a half-billy singer (Elmer Moore) performs the traditional hobo song "Wabash Cannonball" against a bare wall, continuing to lip-synch as the recording grotesquely slows down—a scene that prefigures the surrealistic performance motifs in David Lynch's cinema. *Alma Mater* may be the slightest of the three shorts in *Troika*, but it only looks that way in relation to the others that flank it, and basically *nothing* could withstand comparison to what comes next.

Film Three: The Blue People

Fred, if you don't like this world that we live in, why don't

It's here, with this challenge to his creativity, that Hobbs takes *Troika* into the stratosphere. A fantastical biped, its mask-like face nodding within a carapace resembling some wondrous beetle, takes a journey by old-West train. The creature (and credits refer to it as the Bug-Man; its onscreen name is Rax) disembarks to walk the hills, before being attacked by a savage seen burning a chicken with a blowtorch. Beaten with a stone axe and left for dead, the Bug-Man staggers to a beach and collapses, twitching feebly

whereupon a deep reddish-orange woman emerges from the sea pushing a sculpture mounted on wheels. She attempts an erotic encounter caressing the Bug-Man and fingering his wounds, but as he lies there unable to respond she ends up pleasuring herself instead. Perhaps the encounter was not so one-sided after all: as I remembered, we then see Rax enter an ice-cave, where he encounters a black Shaman called the Attenuated Man, a seven foot tall giant who speaks in draggily slowed-down Arabic. As red smoke billows through the cave and the Shaman shares his vision with Rax, another Hobbs sculpture – 'Three Thieves' – protrudes from the ice, melting, creating an effect halfway between ossuary and church (the three figures, blue faced and dead, are clearly corpses post-crucifixion). Meanwhile, cutaways have shown a mysterious procession making its way who-knows-where through strange, alien countryside. Comprising a phalanx of Blue People – carrying banners and accompanied by a strange vehicle (Hobbs's 'Trojan Horse' car sculpture), they are suddenly joined by Rax. Seemingly embraced by the blue people as a saviour, Rax is escorted in regal splendour, yet a sadness envelops proceedings as we cut to scenes of a train passing through a ghost town, from whose empty wooden houses blue and purple people either stare, wave, or shake their fists. The procession arrives at a railway terminus, and among a collection of ancient carriages and railway ephemera, Rax leaves by train. The blue people wave goodbye and the film comes full circle, with the departure as point of arrival. A final enigmatic shot merges Rax with the Three Thieves in a shadowy tableau.

As can probably be gleaned from this synopsis, the *Blue People* segment of *Trunka* is a treasure-chest of visual riches and symbolic enigmas that has to be seen to be believed. The only point of comparison I can make is the work of

André Jodorowsky, but Hobbs is basically out on his own here, creating a mysterious realm populated by astonishing anomalous constructions and conveyed through exceptional dream-like imagery. Every element is unique: the landscapes are either hauntingly alien or like desolate fragments of a decayed past. Hobbs shot some scenes in an honest-to-goodness California ghost town, Colinsville, by the Sacramento Delta. One breathtaking long shot was obtained by marching the Blue People down a country path between fields burnt black by a recent fire, the Blue People were actually played by a group of Berkeley student activists whom Hobbs had rigorously drilled to march in step.

As if the visual imagination on offer were not enough, *Trunka* boasts astonishingly effective music (composed by the director himself with his editor Gordon MacLier) which sets the tone for this new world. The two men created a realized musical environment, not unlike LaMonte Young's Theatre of Ideas. Music – a drone music that suggests all the journeys of mankind. Hobbs uses slow drumbeats and a backwards musical tone – ebbing and flowing aimlessly, joined here and there by gongs and cymbals, or Japanese pipes, or strange arabesques from an early synthesizer. For nearly forty minutes this remarkable score creates an elastic, suspended moment in which the mysterious action unfolds.

Along with the vivid sound design, Hobbs also reaches his extraordinary colour sense. The final act of *Trunka* is an orgy of deep, vibrant hues, cobalt blues, rich purples and glowing reds applied to the faces and bodies of his cast, and of course the sculptures themselves. Hobbs has a effect created a moving painting or a three-dimensional



animated sculpture, incorporating machines, found objects, skies, fields, trains, derelict houses and human beings. The oft-stated desire to merge art and reality finds a credible praxis here. As the imaginary occupies the real, Hobbs's sculptures are set free to encounter each other in a world beyond galleries, exhibition spaces, or museums. The cast too enter a world defined by Hobbs's art, being encased in his sculptures or smothered in his paint. It is incredibly imaginative – at a time when optical solarisation effects were so popular (as a *de rigueur* indicator of psychedelia), it is refreshing to see someone take colour and apply it directly to the actors, in other words, changing the reality *before* the camera not *after* it. Rather like Antonioni, who had swatches of grass painted red to suit his needs in *Il deserto rosso*. Hobbs enters the real world with his colour (and with less disrespect to the environment.)

Symbolically speaking, it is the sort of odyssey tale that leaves doors wide open to interpretation. A young boy, seen from time to time staring out of a train window, may hold a key to the structure – perhaps all this is his father's vision of his eternal life? Religious themes are clearly apparent – Rax for instance seems to be accepted as a saviour of the Blue People (albeit a departing one). The Arabic statements of the Attenuated Man, chosen without knowledge of their meaning at the time, are slowed down





by a manipulation almost to the point of obscurity, but according to Hobbs they turn out to be Kierkegaard statements of Universal Brotherhood. The blue faces recall certain rituals of the Navajo Indians, and the Alienated Man is clearly a Shaman, so like Jodorowsky's films, *Tenka* strives towards a multi-faceted religious symbolism in which Christianity (most clearly present in the 'Three Thieves' sculpture) takes its place as a single card in a kind of multi-syllabic tarot deck.

With a shot of the painless we saw at the start now completed, Hobbs leaves the studio, and *Travika* ends. The version that Frederic Hobbs has allowed me to see is still not a perfect work, but it is clearly one of the most important, original work by an artist of genuine vision. And in the subsequent encounter between a disturbing and frustrating, *Travika* is his masterpiece, and its eventual release on DVD should be awaited with the utmost anticipation.

Mathematics 3: Geometry (973)

[illegible]

Judging by *Atlantia's Ghost*, Fredric Hobbs would call my next-day rewrites chickenshit. In fact, he confirmed to me that he never rewrites his scripts, an artistic choice that coincidentally aligns him with the Beat writer Jack Kerouac. His stories positively delight in devil-may-care flights of fancy. This presents difficulties when interpreting his work. Should we try piecing the ideas together looking for an overall standpoint? Or we can and float downstream, as *The Beatles* recommended in "Tomorrow Never Knows".

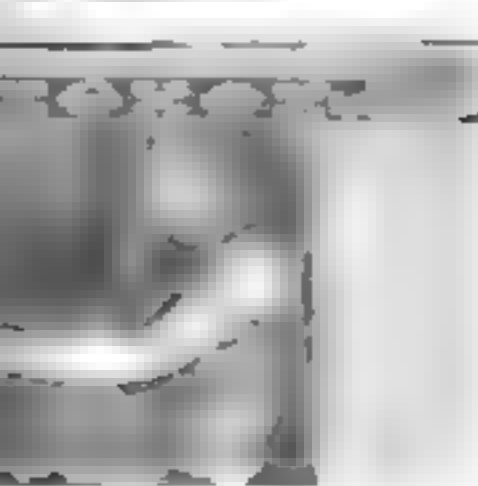
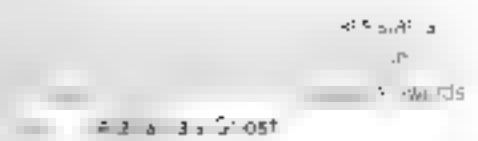
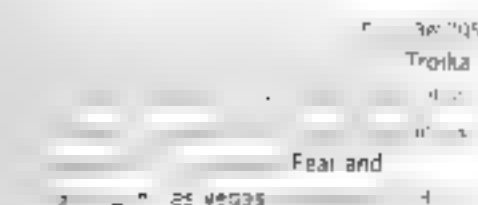
with Hobbs as our 24/7a spirit-guide? Either way the experience is unique: so stand by dopers, druggies, act heads, and dance magic-uns: *Alabama's Ghost* is a rural mind-blower.

Robbins hits the ground running with an opening narrative about good and bad Zeta Energy that, frankly, renders the upcoming proceedings as clear as mud. You feel as if a freight train is coming on too fast. Onscreen, a night-time cityscape roils in superimposed smoke, curling through the air like wispie fumes from some imaginary spiffhead in the firmament. After a jazz number entitled "Who's the Ghostiest with the Mostest?" performed by The Turk Murphy Band, the story follows the fortunes of a young black man called Alab (Christopher Brooks) who, while working as handyman in San Francisco theatre, accidentally smashes a cellar wall with his fork-lift truck and discovers a secret passage leading to a treasure trove of stage magic props belonging to the deceased "Carter the Great" (E. Kermann Prescott). Despite warnings from Carter's ghost (yes, we're dealing with the spirit world, not Penn & Teller), Alab decides to exploit his discovery for personal gain, embarking on a successful tour as a freaky West Coast stage magician, "King of the Cosmos." Along the way he makes an enemy of the magician's ailing sister, Grumpy Carter (Ken Grandham), and meets Otto Max (Steven Keim), a well-besuited major-domo with a Terence Stamp demeanour. Otto Max becomes Alab's manager, declaring, "Stay where it's at" and he's unfazed when Alab admits Carter's ghost, sneering, "If Carter ever shows up I'll turn him into Miami for the squares." Also interested in Alab is media Svengali Jerry Gault (Ken Grandham again): his pallid skin is a clue to his real identity.

Alabama's Ghost is unique in its relation to the genre thanks to the director's background in avant-garde and design. Drawing on his previous work in sculpture mixed media art, Hobbs populates the movie with enormous constructions and costumes. Alabama's car, for example, is an enormous sculpted edifice, sprouting like protuberances and embellishments. The vehicle's "Trojan Horse" was first used in Hobbs's 1963 work *Long on*, a concert whose program was devoted to the car as, "ancient religious processions and self-propelled architecture." These parade pieces (including his 1964 *Three Thieves* and the *Trojan Horse*) were Hobbs' imaginative way of removing art from its museum environment and bringing it to the attention of a mass audience, "in the circumstances of everyday life," as he put it. His driveable art vehicles were exhibited in a travel show entitled *The Highway* which crossed the USA from San Francisco to New York in 1964 and 1965.

In terms of design, and the director's wildly
 wonderful *art* *genre*s experience, amalgamating hon-
 mous, theatrical stylings and counterculture satire in
 of demented bricolage. No one makes movies like Hubbs
 is probably the most unusual, idiosyncratic director of a
 book, and it's a shame that this, his strangest and most
 genre assemblage, is not more widely known.

However this is not a film without difficulties for a modern audience. The main aspect of the film is, to say least, ambiguous (which led to difficulties finding an audience on the film's release). The title suggests that while central to the story, the Southern state of Anahim,



being, at the time, virtually emblematic of racism. You wonder at first if the 'ghost' is meant to suggest America's bad conscience. But Hobbs is not concerned with making easily digestible racial statements. His disdain for didacticism is admirable, but it means that the film's racial congruities take epigrama to the point of frustration. Carter the ghostly magician is white, and Alabama has stolen his secrets – it's like a reversal of white trumpeter Roy Castle stealing black Voodoo rhythms for his jazz band in the Amicus horror film *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* (1965). Carter's ghost warns of dire consequences. 'Alabama goes ahead with his performance, and when Alabama protests, Carter cries: 'Silence, black man. Heed my warning.' Alabama replies, in a kind of huzarte pre-echo of *Ghostbusters*, 'I ain't afraid of no white racist ghost.' So far so strange, but when Carter retorts, 'Your ambition will contaminate the planet!' one's mouth hangs open in amazement. For a 'white racist ghost' to lecture a black man on the evils of global greed is so skewed a concept that it enters the realms of the surreal. *Alabama's Ghost* arrived just a year after Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and in a climate where such angry black movies were finding an audience, the checkerboard detachment and unaligned ambiguity of Hobbs were massively out of step (an occupational hazard, I suppose, when your work marches to the beat of a different drum).

Hobbs is an intelligent, globally-conscious artist and in no way a bigot, but it can be hard, certainly on first viewing, to work out just what *Alabama's Ghost* is saying about race. What emerges after the dust has settled is a sort of allegory in which the black man is herded by white commercialism, and his own opportunism, into trading with the devil. The racial angle is given a further twist when Alabama runs off to the shanty town where his mother lives, chased by a black female vampire whose face is painted purple. One's mind reels, and the films of José Mojica Marins feel just a gravestone away. Terrified, Alabama arrives at Maria's house, and promptly suffers a seizure there. Christopher Brooks offers perhaps the only realistic performance of the film, going beyond his studied theatricality elsewhere to offer a glimpse of a plausible mental breakdown. If the viewer is expecting the weirdness to let up now – though, they're mistaken, Maria, a resolutely sensible woman in appearance, says, 'There ain't no vampires then here in this town. Why the only vampires I heard about moved into the city after Prohibition.' Just as we're about to ascribe a terminal weirdness to the film, we see Voodoo paraphernalia in Maria's kitchen. She's not crazy

– she's just hip to metaphysics. What's strange, though, is the way this excursion into Alabama's racial heritage is then deployed. Voodoo could have offered Hobbs a means of engaging with a black audience – after all, in a story about magic, starring a black man being haunted by a powerful white magician, Voodoo offers racial empowerment. But Voodoo does not raise the character's consciousness – after partaking in Voodoo rites (and some Brazilian-style psychosurgery), Alabama believes he can repel Carter's magic, and so ploughs on with his intention to offer Carter's disappearing elephant trick to the villainous – and very white – Gault. It turns out that Carter's warnings are correct: by ripping off Carter's act and allowing ambition to blind him to Gault's true nature, Alabama very nearly *does* "contaminate the planet", and almost destroys himself to boot. Just to cap it all, it's Carter – not Alabama, who sorts out Gault, in a weirdly heroic finale. I guess it's no wonder black audiences declined to embrace the film.

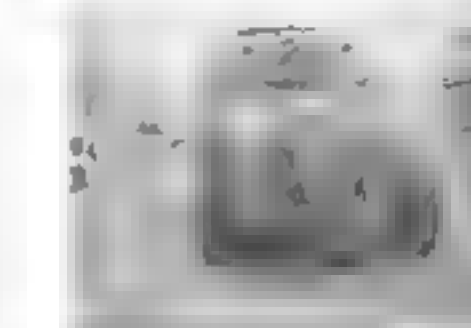
(Exploitation, horror, psychedelia, pop satire – How about some sci-fi?" you're probably asking. Not to worry. Hobbs has covered this angle too: a scene where Otto Muxbrief's Gault is futuristically surreal, with bleeps and whirrs on the soundtrack, flashing lights and bizarre technology in the set design, and faceless goons hanging around in freaky sunglasses, like something from the weirder episodes of *The Prisoner*. Coincidental echoes of Patrick McGowan's TV allegory can also be detected in the extensive use of wide-angle lenses and the obsession with global media control while the word 'hip' is used repetitively between Otto and Gault in a way that recalls Alexis Kanner in *The Prisoner* episode, *Fall-Out*. Technology is used here to suggest control and surveillance, the dominance of the masses by a handful of media moguls. It's a product of its time in this sense, with its vision of the Global Village as Global Brainwashing Machine.

So what is Hobbs saying about the counter-culture? The vampires hand out free dope at a concert where Alabama is to play to the world via TV satellite link-up. They intend to transmit their malevolent spell worldwide during Alabama's act. Heavy. "Free admission to all who want to come," says Gault, Master Vampire of Media Hall. In a film of relettues mixed messages, this is perhaps the most damning comment of all. Gault is the voice of commercialism. Yet when it's time to mount Alabama's great spectacle, he specifies that entry should be free, declaring, "I want the world to see an ocean of bodies, like a great human tidal wave." What is this saying about the treasured late sixties notion of free festivals, what is it saying about the whole hippie dream? The notion of "everything for free" was espoused in particular by a faction of hippies called the Diggers, who set up shops in which all the contents, including food, drink, and works of art, were free. Criticism of the hippies has more commonly centred on their willingness to *sacrifice* these high ideals. Gault has thus to say: "This is much greater than gate receipts. I want their bodies – their minds will come later." Such a pointed reversal of "free your mind and your ass will follow" suggests a director truly at odds with the counterculture, a fifthly paid-up member of the awkward squad, rather like Derek Jarman, whose punkily anti-punk film *Jubilee* (1977) gave many safety-pinned members of the Black Generation a more effective dose of alienation than their Sex Pistols records. One thing's for certain: *Alabama's Ghost* is no simple pleasure-fest for stoned drop-outs.

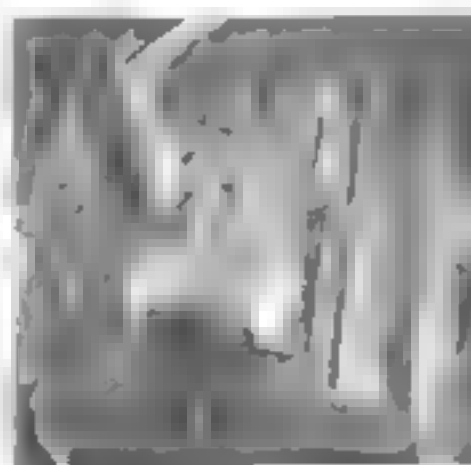
Whatever the political implications of Hobbs's musings, his approach reveals a deeply nonconformist sensibility. You can tell from the movie's antagonistic, contradictory tone – acting in *Alabama's Ghost* veers from crazy comedy to malevolent parody – allegory jostles with surrealism, and in sequences like the one in which a pack of vampires suck blood from girls tied screaming to a rickety wooden conveyor belt system, Hobbs visualises truly dream-like variations on fairytale themes. You sense a free-thinking artist at full flow, unencumbered by notions of how things are *supposed* to be done. What's more, his comic sense of humour is never far away – an arch, satirical style tilts everything into a carnival where half-glimpsed ideas and teetering exaggeration. Some viewers may find the film's eccentricity a little too close to the studied wackiness of, say, Frank Zappa, but it's nonetheless defiantly out of the ordinary. Heroically oblivious to the trail of wrecked convention he leaves in his wake, Hobbs goes his own sweet way without giving an inch, either to the commercial pressures of genre, or the constricting seriousness of 'art cinema'.



Hobbs's Trojan horse into the streets



Alabama's Ghost



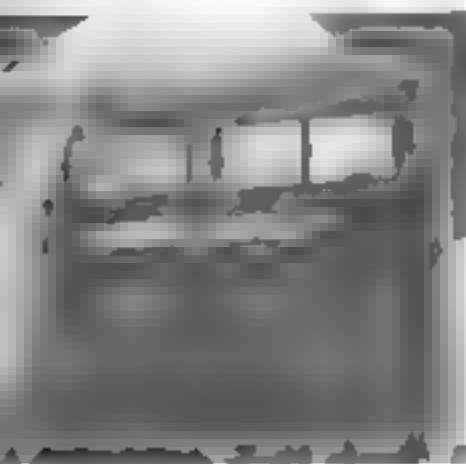
Who's the Ghostest with the Mostest?



Page 214: Barnstable finds a hostile reception

Godmonster of Indian Flats

The Godmonster is caged and displayed to



Godmonster of Indian Flats (1973)

A sheep farmer called Eddie (Richard Marion) is fleeced of his gambling winnings after falling in with the wrong crowd during a boozey celebration in Reno, Nevada. Experimental biologist Dr Clemens (E. Kiergan Prescott), recognising the luckless fellow as a neighbour, drives him back home to his flock. Drunk and exhausted, Eddie falls asleep with his livestock. During the night he experiences a strange vision, and discovers a mutant sheep embryo in the pen. Dr Clemens returns the next morning to check on Eddie, with his assistant Mariposa (Karen Ingenthron) in tow. Eddie shows them the mutant, and Clemens insists on taking back to his lab for analysis. Meanwhile, a businessman called Barnstable (Christopher Brooks) comes to the nearby town of Virginia City, trying to persuade the townspeople to sell their land rights to a major mining corporation owned by the shadowy Rupert Reich. The Mayor, Charles Silverdale (Stuart Lancaster), and his ally Philip Maldove (Steven Keni Browne), who have their own nefarious plans for the region, meet with Barnstable and tell him that his offers are not welcome. When Barnstable insists on staying in town, Silverdale and Maldove, in cahoots with the local sheriff (Robert Hirschfield), stage the accidental shooting of a dog and blame it on the visitor. After a phoney dog-funeral, staged in the local church, Barnstable finds that people in the town are no longer prepared to listen to his propositions. Maldove takes his vendetta against Barnstable a step further, and frames him for attempted murder. A lynch mob descends on the police cell and drag Barnstable off to be killed by a shadowy group called 'The 60' Society'. But he escapes and makes for Clemens's laboratory. Meanwhile, at the lab, the mutant sheep is growing rapidly. Clemens theorizes that phosphates from turn-of-the-century mining techniques have combined with mutant sheep DNA to produce his new creature, a theory that also explains various myths about mine-monsters dating back to the 1890s. As the vigilantes converge on the area and Barnstable tries to gain entry, the monster breaks free and rampages across the country, destroying a gas station and searing children. It's finally hunted down by a posse of cowboys, dragged into town at the behest of the Mayor, and exhibited to the townspeople in a cage at the town rubbish dump. However, Silverdale has betrayed everyone by selling out to Reich's corporation. In fury, the townspeople trash everything, including the monster, and Silverdale is left alone, ranting on a podium overlooking the dump. Far away on the opposite hillside, a low phosphate gas emerges from the soil and enshrouds a pair of grazing sheep.

Thanks to Something Weird's DVD release, *Godmonster of Indian Flats* is probably the best known and most widely distributed of Fredric Hobbs's films today, which is ironic considering that *Godmonster* went virtually unreleased back in '73, except for a couple of L.A. screenings (see interview). In fact its commercial failure brought Hobbs's film career to an end. Looking back at the four films Hobbs made, however, it's strange to think it was this one that failed to get distribution, because in many ways it's his most conventional movie, with acting of a far more ordered kind than the chaotic, satirical declamations seen in Hobbs's previous movies. It's also tangibly more accessible in its subject matter: small-town corruption juxtaposed with monster-movie mayhem. Where *Alabama's Ghost* has four or five themes jostling for attention, *Godmonster* has a parallel montage structure that charts the petty villainy of

Silverdale and his cronies alongside the birth, development, and eventual destruction of a monster. The film could almost be ranked along with Bill Rebane's *The Giant Spider Invasion*, in which religious revivalists in a small rural fail to respond to an attack of mutated spiders.

So, a normal, regular B-movie from Fredric Hobbs? I'm teasing, of course. Once you actually watch the thing, you realise that it's as far-out and idiosyncratic as his other films, and as stubbornly resistant to formalisation. Hobbs is a diptych, with the monster theme set alongside a political plot exposing the venality of the town's most influential citizens, although there's no direct causal link between the financial exploitation perpetrated by Silverdale and the appearance of the creature; the two stories vibrate against each other in a resolutely unclipped way. Mining techniques from the heyday of the Comstock Lode are responsible for the mutation, and the film can be seen as an indictment of big business pollution, reaching all the way back to the gold-rush. The theme of greed is mirrored by the actions of Clemens, who thirsts for the scientific glory he hopes will be his when he reveals the mutant sheep to the world. It's a commonplace in monster movies for the monster to represent some current evil, whether it be nuclear radiation (*Fiend Without a Face*), or environmental pollution (*Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster*). Hobbs embraces the format, taking a pop at a symbol of American big business by having his monster destroy a gas station, a concern for the world's dwindling resources that animates the film with Hobbs's ecological track record, as expressed in his 'Art Leo' paintings and sculptures.

Now, to the monster. If you can't love this shambling ungainly mound of fluff and bone tottering through the countryside like a giant elderly drunk in a rotting kaftan then you simply have no soul. Some have apparently chided the construction, claiming it's unprofessional, or unconvincing, but it seems to me that the whole point of designing a monster is to come up with something we haven't seen before. What would be the point of sculpting another Creature from the Black Lagoon? Another King Kong? The best screen monsters positively revel in their own unlikelyness: that's why even the rock-bottom budgeted *Robot Monster* has an ineffable charm that you simply can't ignore. If a monster looks implausible, that's a major plus. Bearing in mind, anyway, that it's a mutation whose growth has been artificially speeded up, it's hardly surprising that it looks as if it's going to fall apart at any second. Surrounded by humans who're seeking to exploit it for their own ends, the Godmonster (never named as such in the film) becomes the only real focus of sympathy in the film. Even a character like Barnstable is simply a lackey working on behalf of big business. He may be the victim of scurrilous allegations by the mayor, but he's also out to secure the sale of private land holdings to a major corporation – so he's far from the Everyman hero one might expect. It's typical of Hobbs that his characters are never drawn with a view to establishing conventional rapport or identification. Barnstable is probably the nearest thing to a lead character in the story, in terms of screen time at least, and given that he's the only black man in a town run by corrupt whites, you might expect him to assume some vaguely heroic function. That such a condescending use of race never materialises is a testament to Hobbs's unsentimental approach to character.

Godmonster of Indian Flats is a film of indelible images. The setting evokes the American past, courtesy of the town of Virginia City, maintained as a tourist site where



Hobbs's approach to film courts comparison to Fellini in sweep and style, to Bergman in concentration and intensity and to Truffaut in the whimsical use of plagiarism and paraphrases of old movie classics and in deft juxtaposition of moods and genres, adding up to a kind of one-man American New Wave" - *Rolling Stone Magazine*

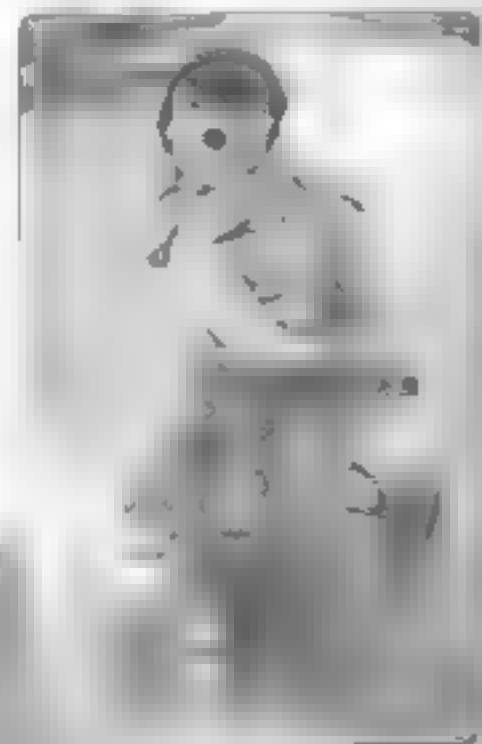
Fredric Hobbs is first and foremost an artist, specifically a painter and sculptor, and he has maintained a presence in the art world from the 1950s to the present day. By contrast, his film directing career spanned just four years, from his debut, *Doika*, in 1969, to his swansong *Godmonster of Indian Flats*, in 1973. It's worth bearing this in mind before considering his movies, which, for all their abundant qualities, are best seen as a wild, feverish digression from his fine art work.

Hobbs was born 30 December, 1931, in Philadelphia. He graduated from Cornell University, where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree. After serving as an Air Force Officer he maintained a studio in Madrid, where he attended the Academia de San Fernando de Bellas Artes. Since the late 1950s, when he moved to San Francisco, his work has been committed to issues of spiritual and environmental consciousness. Between 1960-69 he founded the San Francisco Art Center, the city's first integrated live-and-work real estate for the creative professions. He himself conducted master classes there, as well as directing a fine art program, with studio classes in drawing, advanced sculpture, and mixed media. He has also taught at the San Francisco Art Center. He was for a while the Chairman of the Department of Fine Art at Lincoln University, San Francisco. He even opened a shop for a while, called Fredric Hobbs Fine Arts.

Hobbs's wonderful
in a

Hobbs is the author
exhibition of his career
1994. Behind them

Portrait of Fascism as
high Hobbs



the 1980s live on. It's the sort of production value that would add millions to a film budget if you had to start from scratch, and it demonstrates Hobbs's canny knack for choosing found objects (in *Atahump's Ghost* the expensive looking magic props, in *Godmonster* a whole town) that add lustre to the quality of the finished work. Hobbs also gets maximum visual interest from his monster in one of the film's most mind-bending sequences. Mariposa, ostensibly the Professor's assistant but actually a sort of lumpy flower child, tries to communicate with the escaped mutation by dancing with it on a hillside, in a slow-motion sequence that's psychedelic in quite the strangest way. Then there's the scene in which the monster staggers onto the manicured lawn of a well-to-do household, terrorizing a group of happily picnicking children. Perhaps the strongest, most pointed (and poignant) imagery of the film is concentrated in the final act, as the Mayor unveils the recaptured monster in a cage at the town rubbish dump, declaring that he is to charge admission for a glimpse of it. As the symbolic en point of human greed, the rubbish tip is a fitting climax for Hobbs's ecological allegory, and the townspeople's unceremonious destruction of this 'Eighth Wonder of the World' when they learn they've been conned out of their hard-earned (another sign of Hobbs's unsentimental way with narrative) suggests how little hate people have for wonder and amazement when they're focused purely on self-interest. *Godmonster*, a story about manipulative businessmen and corrupt science, ends up indicting the whole town, it would seem that the ominous curl of yellow smoke emerging from the soil of a neighbouring field signals just desserts for the whole greedy community.

Who's the Ghostiest with the Mostest?



Spanning
the Pacific
grotesque

In the early 1970s, he pioneered an art form he dubbed Art Eco, combining environmental technology, fine art, solar architecture and interactive communications, with the aim of pointing the way to an ecologically balanced lifestyle. One-person exhibitions of his pioneering artworks have been held at museums and galleries, including the Museum of Science and Industry, Los Angeles, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, the Sierra Nevada Museum of Art, and other venues in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Numerous works are represented in the permanent collections of the New York Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, the Oakland Museum of Art, and the Sierra Nevada Museum of Art.

In April 1984 Hobbs suffered injuries from a major automobile accident, requiring lengthy convalescence – an experience which inspired a new “Pacific Series” of Art Eco icons and drawings. In 1988-89 he co-produced four PBS Network Programs, under the group heading, *Taiwan: The Other China*. Since the mid-1980s, Hobbs has been at work on *Ecofuture*, a kind of video notebook featuring thoughts on modern culture, commentary on environmental and political crises in modern life, and recontextualized fragments from his movies. He is also the author of several books that combine portfolios of original artworks with text exploring both his ecological concerns and the history of his beloved Monterey coast.

Triptych

Hobbs's first involvement with the moving image came in 1967 when, in collaboration with filmmakers Ron Bostwick and Robert Blausdell, he assembled a documentary called *Trojan Horse*, recording the public unleashing of Hobbs's parade sculpture of the same name. Hobbs drove his “Trojan Horse” – actually a Chrysler chassis with newly sculpted bodywork bolted over the top, turning the vehicle

into a phantasmagorical bonelike construction – across America in 1964 (it can also be seen in all its glory in Hobbs's later film *Alabama's Ghosts*).²

Feeling drawn to the cinema after this cool show, Hobbs decided it would be worth taking over the director's reins entirely and making his own film, drawing on his design and sculptural skills to fashion a full-length dramatic feature. The result was typically uncategorisable: a three-part avant-garde surrealist comedy with polemical asides and documentary footage, called *Triptych* (1969).

Hobbs describes the film as, “a miracle play – but underground.” He reserves his greatest satisfaction for the film's final segment, saying, “Each section gets stranger and more interesting until the last part really takes.” Sadly, as yet *Triptych* remains unavailable both on video and DVD. Hobbs is determined that this should remain the unit, he has secured the right deal, and until he has finished re-editing the film. Like his neighbour George Lucas, he obsessively motivated to correct perceived flaws in the original, and refuses to release *Triptych* in its original version. It's very much to be hoped that he will one day soon settle on a satisfactory version, so that audiences can sample the source of his cinematic vision and perhaps better understand how to approach his later, more narrative-oriented work.

Shooting the film, and all of Hobbs's subsequent screen endeavours, was Kentucky-born William Heck. Heck was a film photographer in the US Navy during the Second World War, who moved to San Francisco in 1945 and became embroiled in the burgeoning experimental film scene. Heck worked with another San Franciscan director, Sidney Peterson, the avant-garde short filmmaker between 1948 and 1957. He met Hobbs in 1962, and warmed to him as a friend and a serious artist of vision. “Hobbs's films are sorta unique, they don't fit into any category,” he says. “His laconic observation is a typical understatement from Heck, whose steady technical hand helped guide the wilder visions of Hobbs to the screen. The two met a strong creative alliance that persisted all the way to *Godmonster of Indian Flats* and their friendship has lasted to this day. First, though, came Hobbs's scatter-shot sequel up of the sexual revolution – without a doubt the oddest movie ever paid for by veteran exploitation producer Harry Novak.

The Sexual Revolution and Its Discontents

Roseland (1970) is the sort of film that could get you kicked out of the room on your ass if you showed it to your friends during an acid trip. It's a bit like The Rolling Stones' *Their Satanic Majesties Request*; it might seem like a trippy idea to begin with, but after a while you're ready to kill someone.

E. Kerrigan Prescott is Adam – a man addicted to pornography to the degree that he actually steals film porno movies, dressing in disguise and adopting the name of ‘The Black Bandit’. In one of the film's more amusing conceits, we learn that Adam became fascinated with pornographic imagery through his early exposure to the work of Hieronymus Bosch, in particular his *Earthly Delights*. If you're wondering what the hell sleazebag like Harry Novak pick this up for distribution, it is explained by several prolonged sequences of hippie nudity, and some extended burlesque numbers that accommodate the exploitation entrepreneur's taste for pre-



hardcore puchitude. "They wanted a skinflick," Hobbs says. "It's not a porno or anything, but my intention was a sort of satire of the sexual revolution."

The highlight of the film is an extended flashback revealing that Adam lost his job in television after mounting a lavish musical spectacular called "You Cannot Fart Around with Love." With elements of big-band TV specials, off-kilter corny jazz, and a zazziness that recalls Frank Zappa's satirical recordings, it manages to be both freakishly weird and teeth-grindingly silly, with Prescott's eye-rolling-to-camera wackiness breaking the fourth wall à la The Monkees. *Roseland* is as unique as any of Hobbs's other works, but for me it's his least successful venture. Of course with such highly personal work, responses will vary widely over the spectrum, so you can still take it as read that *Roseland* is worth checking out if you have an interest in sixties Americana and the counterculture. It's certainly strange whether it's good is very much a matter for you.

Hobbs and the Sixties

Hobbs, the very definition of a square peg in a round hole, climbed from a brief, narrow window of opportunity in the late sixties and early seventies. Film industry businessmen were scrounging around for clues after the mysterious success of *Easy Rider* (1969). Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda had discovered the late sixties equivalent of the Sex Pistols' anarchy in the U.K.—a trailblazing shock to the system that came roaring out of left field. Its sudden redefinition of the youth market left the cultural establishment confused and out of touch. In the wake of *Easy Rider*, the film industry tried to come to terms with the counterculture and, for several creatively fertile years, it opened up and diversified almost in desperation. Rogue elements were able to infiltrate the hallowed ground of the mainstream: this was the time when films such as *Pumpkin Soup* and *Medium Cool* found funding, the latter even gaining distribution through Paramount.

Hobbs entered the fray with his avant-garde epic *Trunka* and his lunatics have taken over the organ's voice. *Roseland* to show would-be financiers. Five years earlier or later and he would have been shown the door. But as the decade turned, producers looking for far-out filmmakers saw in Hobbs both a genuine craftsman (thus, orthodox points for skill) and a bohemian artist (thus, counter-culture kudos as well). Perhaps Hobbs would turn out to be one of those indefinable weirdoes headed for a breakout financial success, like that crazy-ass Dennis Hopper? Hobbs's financiers must have hoped that they'd found a left-field cash-cow whose work would tap the unpredictable youth market. Since the kids were taking acid, dropping out, painting their faces, rioting, and refusing to sign up for Death-Nam, maybe Hobbs with his extraordinary Art Deco and fierce individualism, would light their fires?

Hobbs's agent George Litto would be the catalyst of his future forays into cinema, as Hobbs explains: "He began about my first ultra-low-budget movies and called me up, asked me to come to Hollywood, in my case I made such fantastic movies for so little money they figured it was best to leave me alone and let me do my thing, as long as the script was okay." Hobbs later introduced his producer on *Godmonster*, Robert Bremson, to Litto, which paid dividends for the latter when Bremson supported Litto's subsequent move into film production, with projects for Brian De Palma (*Obsession*) and Robert Altman (*Thieves Like Us*).

Who's the Ghostest with the Mostest?



Futuristic Jazz-Age Horror-Satire

Hobbs's next film, *Atabuta's Ghost*, is a quantum leap on from *Roseland*. It's a gobsnuckingly outlandish affair that left even the normally unflappable E. van, Cassandra Peterson, lost for words when she introduced it, years later on her cable show and subsequent video label. Imagine Alejandro Jodorowsky remaking Russ Meyer's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* in blaxploitation style. With vampires, And Voodoo. It's a film that could only have been conceived in the sixties/seventies Interzone, spritzing a Satan's brew of a regoty and many across a sprawling canvas unhampered by considerations of genre. It's also yet another stoner film to critique the hippie movement, a common feature of counter-culture cinema through *The Trip to Easy Rider* and *The Holy Mountain* (Hopper's "We blew it" being the defining perception of the era). The film again leans heavily on satire this time adding a sardonic enunciation of the horror genre's clichés. Yes, it is a horror film of sorts, encompassing the

Poster for *Roseland*

It's easy to see why *Roseland* attracted the attention of Harry Novak, entrepreneur and producer of *Atabuta's Ghost*



supernatural and replete with monsters, both human and superhuman. We have witchcraft and magic, madness and hallucination, fangs and blood and freakiness. Typically though, Hobbs straddles the intermediate area between genres: it's a horror film, but it's never really scary, it's a comedy, but you don't exactly laugh. It's debatable whether

Hobbs knows how to set up a scare, or a joke for that matter in the traditional sense – but it's a moot point, as he's not making that sort of a film. *Alabama's Ghost* is an act of cine bricolage – using off-cuts from the horror genre, and locations and props bequeathed for free by theatre acquaintances – all assembled with a sly artistic awareness.

Meanwhile the cast attack their roles with such broadsword swipes that conventional characterisation is chopped into mince meat, a side effect of the theatre background from which the actors came. It's typical of Hobbs's approach that instead of demanding the cast tone it down for the screen, he incorporates their theatrical performances as just more

found objects, to be pressed into the dense impasto of his script. The result is an uncompromisingly individual piece of work with few obvious precursors in genre filmmaking.

The pop satire of *Alabama's Ghost* stands in stark contrast to its traditional jazz score and Houdini-era backstory. Hobbs is an outsider to the sixties youth movement, and some would say that a satirist should have personal investment in whatever he or she satirises. But Hobbs's detachment is an artist's detachment, not an uncomprehending old-timer's, and by welding a critique of the Love Generation's dalliance with the dollar to his own love of the jazz age, he ensures that his work remains personal. By his own admission he could not engage at all with the sensory overload of Hendrix, Led Zepplin, et al: "I never have been and never will be interested in rock music. Some of it is interesting as pageantry, some of the things they do with lighting, and some of the folk-rock is okay, you know, Pete Seger and those guys. I don't hate rock music, but it's over amplified, and I don't like that. I don't like that it damages people's eardrums. Some of it's okay, The Rolling Stones sometimes, The Beatles, The Beach Boys, the people who do it best. I'm not attacking rock music in the film, I just used it to make the thing work as a story."

Alabama Song

It was Hobbs's connection to the jazz world that led to *Alabama's Ghost*, as he explains. "When Turk Murphy, one of our beloved San Francisco jazz musicians, and Pete Clute Turk's partner, a great ragtime pianist, were opening up the basement of the William Tell Hotel, they found many trunks containing the life's works, costumes and paraphernalia of 'Carter the Great' – a great magician of the 1920s and '30s. He was Houdini's partner, and when he died they made a spirit pact that he would come back. So Turk found all this stuff, and decided they would open a Magic Cellar, not in the cellar where they found the junk, but beneath Earthquake McGoon's Nightclub, and they called it Turk Murphy's Magic Cellar. Turk's band played there. All sorts of people, musicians, underground cartoonists, would show up, along with people interested in magic. Robert Crumb was around. It was popular, they would put on great shows there. Woody Allen was a great fan of Turk Murphy's, he would come from New York and play his clarinet with him once in a while. One day a friend of mine, Arnold Passman, the writer and critic who wrote *The Dreyfus*,² told me about it. I went down there with Passman and said, My God what a

movie! This whole thing is a movie! Carter the Great into all kinds of fantastic, strange magical stuff. He made an elephant disappear! And he's very theatrical, he was considered the most theatrical of the famous magicians in the pre-WWII period.

Hobbs decided to pitch the idea to his friend, the producer George Lito. Lito had recently been in the successful low-budget horror movie *Count Fergu Vampire* (Bob Keljan, 1970), and responded immediately to Hobbs's plans for a vampire film set in the world of stage magic: "I told him about the idea for *Alabama's Ghost*, he said, 'That's great, a horror movie, we can do that. Head Horror Movie! is what they called it.' I wrote the treatment and it just worked. I wrote a script, another allegory. I had the idea that an evil guy, a rock impresario in control of all media, is trying to take over the world by turning young people into vampire slaves."

He's really a vampire who wants to take over the world by infecting young people through music. I said, 'we'll start with Christopher Brooks, and we'll call him Alabama, a famous musician. I wrote the treatment pretty fast, in a few days.

Warming to the theme, Hobbs describes his outline thus: "You meet Alabama, and he talks like Lord Buckley,³ who was a fantastic jazz hipster. What a guy, he could really talk. So I gave Alabama his dialogue in the style of Lord Buckley like, 'Yeah, that's cool, man, I like a hundred velvet pussycats dancing on jule.' That's my song. incidentally, Buckley had his own way, but he spoke in a poetic way. So Alabama works for Turk, and one night he goes down to the cellar and his fork – it breaks through the wall, and he discovers the life's work and belongings of Carter the Great, who disappeared in the thirties and was never heard from again. So Alabama decides that he's going to become a 'rock magician' – he's going to go out on the rock circuit and be world famous. Then he calls on these people who have some relation to Carter – like Carter's old sister, Agatha Carter-Crone, who's the world's first transvestite vampire! She's played by that terrific actor Ken Grantham, a very good actor, perfect for this because he had this Josef von Sternberg look. So Carter the Great's sister lives in Sausalito, in a ferryboat. It's a Sausalito ferryboat, people live in houseboats in a community there. Alabama goes over to see Carter's sister, and he's like, 'Khartoum Khaki,' and she says, 'What ya got there? And it turns out the old girl likes to smoke Khartoum Khaki. So they smoke it together. Then he goes along to study magic with the next guy, Moxie the Magnificent. What? The same guy. He tells the audience more about the sort of tricks Carter did. He's a sort of teacher of magic. He has a magic museum. Then there's Doré, played by lovely Peggy Browne, and she turns out to be a vampire too. And then they meet Otto Max, they're going on the rock circuit, and he dresses like Papa Haydn.⁴ That's Steven Ke Brown. He liked to say he was Welsh, but I'm not sure. I think it was because he wanted to be like Richard Burton. He was always after being a romantic hero, but I said, 'You're the perfect villain: everybody hates you, you're horrible.' So he played the role even more vindictively, 'I know.' Among the other people, the groupies, one was Richard Marion, who is now the director of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Christopher Brooks, Steven Kent Brown and Richard Marion were all members of the Magic Theater, which is the big avant-garde theatre at the University of California. It wasn't as big then, but now it's quite famous."

Anyway, Alabama goes to New Orleans where he puts on one of his shows. And the ghost of Carter comes out of the one-sheet for one of his old shows. Alabama accuses the ghost of racism, but it turns out Carter is trying to save Alabama from the vampires. Then the purple vampires show up, and like all good boys he runs home to his mother. She's played by Ann Weldon, who became one of the stars of *Roots*. I gave her her first acting role: she was a singer before that. So she says, 'Come on boy I'm gonna take you to the doctor. And she takes him into the Bayou, and the doctor's a witchdoctor. With a lisp, no less. He's kinda fruity, this guy, we don't make a big thing out of it but who knows. So Alabama's gonna be protected by black magic. The witchdoctor proceeds to sew a frog over his heart! This is all Hobbs, it's all original stuff I might add. So Alabama is not afraid any more. He's sorta chad, i.e. he's like the Everyman Artist.

Having elected to continue with the concert, Alabama attempts to stage Carter's disappearing elephant trick. All does not go well, but in the end the bad guys are defeated. Hobbs continues.

"The elephant was borrowed from *The Ed Sullivan Show*: a friend of Turk's brought her up to the location. She was called Nina. We had crowds but we couldn't have them clapping, because elephants riot. If you clap, so everybody pretended to clap and we added the sound later. For the crushing of Otto Max, we intercut between the real elephant which put its foot on his chest and then we bought one of those elephant foot umbrella stands, you know, and we pushed that down on him, and he screamed and blood came out of his mouth – and that got rid of Otto Max! We had about five hundred extras, including all these little theatre groups. We had The Cockettes, who were famous, gay crazy-looking people, they were in it. But at the end of the day, about 3p.m., all the fog rolls in from the ocean. It was shot right on the coastline, at Lawson's Landing, Dunecrest, it was called, in Marin County. So that was it for the day, because the sky and everything had to match. It took us several days to shoot the whole thing, the rock concert with the attack of the vampire bikers and all, with five cameras!" And the frenzied activity at the climax of the movie, the musical number where Bremson originally was originally a more extreme affair. We had to make that scene, but Bremson insisted it had to be PG-rated. I made a really awful scene where he humiliated her, ate her up, oh, it was so funny. But the censor said you can't do that, so we cut that back. But it was woul. You see, everything Bremson wanted to do had to be 'PG'-rated. He didn't want anything like *Bayeland*. And he wanted the young people to see it of course, which was okay with me. So finally, in the last scene, after Alabama and Midnight embrace, they look up at the sky, and there's the ghost smiling benevolently, and we hear the "Who's the Ghostest with the Mostest" music."

Hobbs, the Interviewer's Nightmare

So there you are: *Alabama's Ghost*, synthesized for you by Fredric Hobbs. Normally, I would consider a detailed account of a movie's plot from the director surplus to print requirements. Thankfully, Hobbs peppers it with a few anecdotal details, and given the film's oddness it's perhaps useful to have confirmation of what is, after all, a fairly bizarre narrative. At the risk of abusing the writer's 'last word' here, though, I would like to share with you the agony and the intrigue of interviewing Fredric Hobbs.

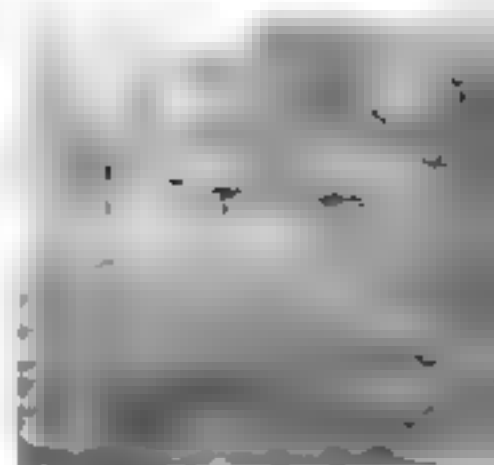
There were many times during the above synopsis when I interjected, or tried to at least to do so, without receiving the faintest acknowledgement. If you wonder why I have not asked some pressing question relating to the film, probably Hobbs's most dense and ambiguous work, well, what can I say: it isn't easy. For an artist fond of symbolism and allegory, he's a cagey devil when it comes to interpretation. In fact, he not only resists offering interpretations himself (quite reasonably – many artists dislike doing so); he also blocks questions that would aid your own interpretative process. The classic reticence of the creative soul, who feels his work has given all it has to give? Perhaps, but the difficulty goes further: for instance, an attempt to place Hobbs in relationship to other artists progress little further than a grudging nod to Expressionism and a willingness to discuss a few of the Old Masters, while discussion of Hobbs's fine art contemporaries – Pollock, or Warhol, for instance – is shot down within seconds.

For me the most frustrating of all Hobbs's discursive idiosyncrasies is his unwillingness to digress in your direction. All of your conversational gambits meet the same fate. Light and playful, provocative or serious, surreal and inappropriate, frivolous or tactless, you can utilize any or all of these approaches, and nine times out of ten, Hobbs will walk on by. Never has the term 'train of thought' been more appropriate: trying to change the subject or divert the flow is doomed to failure. You might as well stand before an express train and ask it to swerve! I have even tried rudeness to jolt a conversation in my direction. Not to worry: Hobbs sails merrily by, and if he notices your desperate measures, he barely lets on. Dialogue is very difficult in such circumstances: our telephone conversations frequently became a sort of annotated monologue, in which I spoke not to elicit a reply but to remind myself on the recording of what it was I wanted to ask. A forlorn process? Well, it's not *quite* so bleak. Hobbs will store things that you ask him, and somehow, half an hour later, you recognise features of an earlier question being glancingly addressed. Nothing so easy as a simple thirty minute delay: it's more like adding drops of a different colour to a slowly churning mass of paint. Gradually you see the shade changing as your colour blends in.

I'm sure that Hobbs has always been a very stubborn personality. What's clear from talking to him (and we've talked for many hours) is that he and his films are hewn from the same rock. If you want the films the way they are, then you have to accept his character. Like Hobbs, *Alabama's Ghost* sails blithely through the tempests it stirs, with never a sideways glance, and it's to these storms in a long-forgotten teacup that we now turn.

Alabama's Controversy

Having gambled (rather modestly, with a budget of \$55,000) on a counterculture hit from an unusual director, the producers did not get what they expected with *Alabama's Ghost*. It's easy to be wise in retrospect, but Hobbs was not a mass-marketable 'voice of the people': he was never going to catalyse the energy of the youth movement into a saleable product, and he would score no triumphs in the youth art arena. It's interesting to compare the fate of another 'far-out' amalgam of art and gutter filmmaking, Alejandro Jodorowsky's metaphysical western *El Topo* (1970), which gained the attention of John Lennon. On the say-so of Lennon and Yoko Ono, Allen Klein's



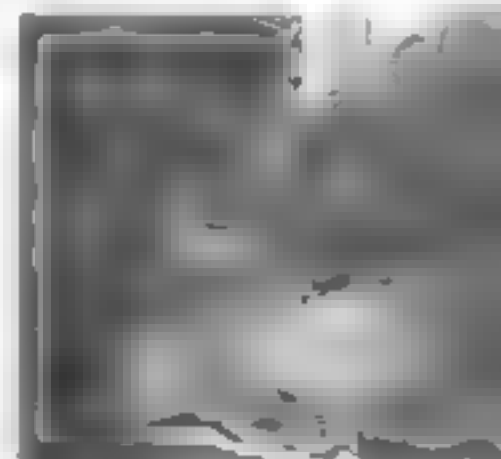
This shot, and all others on this page and opposite are from *Alabama's Ghost*. Here, the Trojan Horse is driven by Alabama.

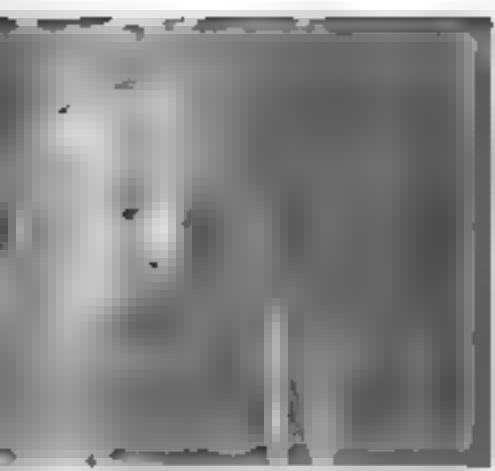
locate the body for Alabama. Together Brooks tracked the body and finds a casket belonging to Carter the

ful of the magician's paraphernalia. He decides to take on Carter's show, but encounters the sinister Gruffy Gator

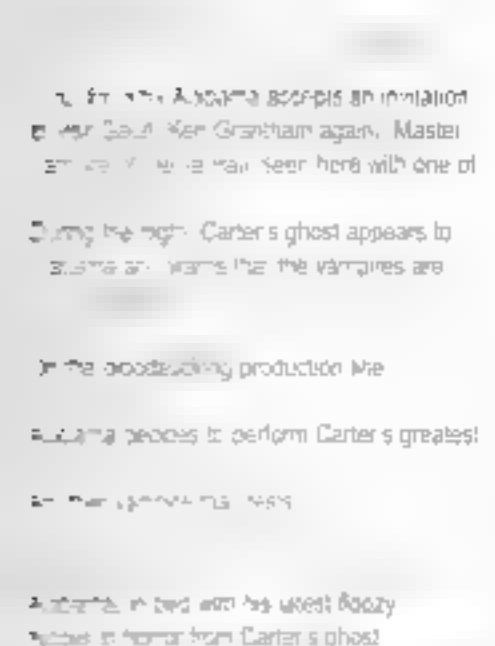
and Moxie the magician. Grantar again before taking Carter's show on the road as Alabama, King of the Coconuts, supported by a bevy of female assassins.

A magic trick goes wrong





shot, and all others on this page and pages 56 and 57 are from Alabama's Ghost. Here we see Alabama that he is



2. In the Alabama script an imitation of Sam Wan-der Graham again. Master of the white man. Seen here with one of

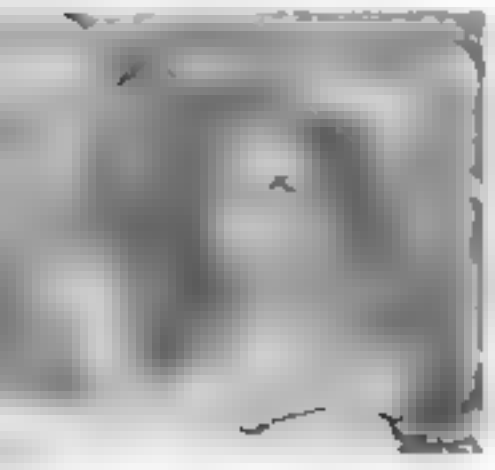
During the night, Carter's ghost appears to Alabama and warns that the vampires are

In the concluding production the

Alabama decides to perform Carter's greatest

In the opening scene

Alabama is back with his worst foezy foezy in terror from Carter's ghost



ABKO financed and distributed the Chilean director's next epic, *The Holy Mountain* (1973), to the tune of \$750,000. Hobbs, unfortunately, was not so lucky. We can only speculate as to what he might have delivered with as financial muscle behind him.

One reason why *Alabama's Ghost* perhaps failed to catch a midnight movie buzz in the manner of Jodorowsky was that Hobbs was forced to keep actual onscreen violence to a minimum. *El Topo* on the other hand was blood-drenched, as befitted Jodorowsky's conviction that blood equates to life force. As his comments make clear, Hobbs would have liked to go further in this direction. *Alabama's Ghost* has a few moments of graphic horror, but they're brief and unlikely to trouble the squeamish. It's a shame, because Hobbs clearly has a natural well of anger from which to draw. There's a real symbolic violence in some of his paintings and pen-and-ink drawings, with their aggressive arcs and splashes, at times his style brings to mind Francisco Goya, fanned of course both for his unflinching portrayals of war and madness, and the bold gestural violence of his pen and brush work. Had Hobbs been able to film images just as unrestrained for the movie screen, he might have caught the attention of a wider audience.

However, there are other reasons why *Alabama's Ghost* failed to become a countercultural hit. Hobbs's detachment from the youth milieu he depicts creates a subtle but appreciable alienation effect, one that perhaps forecloses his chances of scoring with young people. In *Alabama's Ghost* opposing forces are coldly marshaled: the greed of big business, the power-lust of mystics, the conformity-in-nonconformity of youth, and amidst it all, Alabama, no more inspiring a hero than Barton Fink in the eponymous Coen Brothers movie (another film about a man in need of guidance from a threatening spectre).

But of course, Barton was a Jewish character created by Jewish filmmakers. Hobbs is white, and yet his film satirises the opportunist ambitions of its leading Afro-American character. This need not have been a sticking point, however, were it not for the character of Carter the Magician. It apparently never occurred to Hobbs that his audiences might not dig a film in which an opportunist black protagonist needs guidance from a white racist ghost? Of course the ghost is a pompous creature, from a time when attitudes were such that he would naturally address Alabama with a line like, "Silence, black man!" Hobbs is not indulging racist sentiments, he's simply accommodating the speech habits of a bygone era; yet by following the dictates of his storyline, sublimely unconcerned about the way it might be perceived, he left in his wake a slew of confused and angry viewers. Ironically, for a period when the youth movement was aspiring to sanctify individual nonconformity, it was to be Hobbs's devil-may-care individualism that would sink his film commercially.

Hobbs explains, "*Alabama's Ghost* was cheap, it cost \$55,000, but for a lot of reasons it didn't make the money the producers thought it would. It had trouble because of the black issue, and because there wasn't enough violence: it was a 'PG' movie. I played a lot, and a lot of people liked it, so I never considered it a bomb. I thought if they'd only put it in the art-houses it would have been a big success. The distributor was a good guy, too, there were no bad Hollywood people involved, they were all gentlemanly guys. They tried to help me. I was already shooting *Godmonster* by the time they got somebody to take *Alabama* to a outsh-

showed up and thought it was wonderful. Then they took it up to Atlanta, during the first week of December. So first they had it in a pretty good theatre in Atlanta, and the film bombed. They said, 'Gee, you've got a wonderful interesting film, but it's bombed.' So then they had it playing on a Sunday, and there was a football game going on between the San Francisco 49ers and the Oakland Raiders, and whoever won that would go through to the Superbowl. You think nobody's gonna come, right? We guess what? All *kunka* people showed up, and they were dressed in costumes, and they filled up the place, and they loved it, and everyone was asking, 'What the hell happened? What's going on?' Well, this is before *Rocky Horror*. Nobody knew what this film was. I was on home and I got the word that the film was gonna make so much money, because of the Atlanta screening, you know? But the story I got—the truth, I think—is that they booked it next at Cleveland and Chicago, in black-oriented areas, and they got all these theatrical bookings, and then they started advertising so that you had this black guy saying, 'Hey Man, go see the ra-ra-ra-ra—you know, instead of this wonderful refined campaign [laughs]. I didn't hear it, I heard only tiny bits of it, but I can imagine. It was a bad black sell. Based on violence, you know, 'see honky get beat up. They had it in *variety* as No. 38 in the country for a week or two! But *Variety* grosses don't mean a thing. The promotional guys make 'em up. Unfortunately the audience wanted to see whitey get beat up, but they see this strange magician and vampires, and they were very angry. So it was a complete bomb. The black community was furious because they felt the advertising had taken them for a ride, or that's what I heard.'

Hobbs is uncomfortable discussing racial interpretations of *Alabama's Ghost*; he's happy to describe the hostile responses, but he's reluctant to be drawn up what exactly might have created the wrong impression. What was trying to do was to bring the 1970s back, pre Barrymore, you know, Science black man, that kind phoney Shakespeare stuff. I tried to give it that feel. I didn't consciously try to make a racist of him. Unfortunately, when Carter cries "Science, black man and Brooks, a charismatic black performer, dubs Carter a 'white racist ghost'—the audience pretty much buys Alabama's point of view.

After its unfortunate first run, *Alabama's Ghost* entered a period of confusion over rights as it floundered between owners, none of whom managed to extract much commercial mileage. Hobbs recalls, "They played it off at the drive-ins with a movie called *Black Girl* (Ossie Davis, 1972). I don't know if it made any money, I never saw any if it did. They eventually said it but nobody wanted to touch it because the black people were very unhappy with it.

Thankfully, in 1985 *Alabama's Ghost* gained a US video release. Although not the kind of release Hobbs might have wished for—it emerged as part of a series of tapes, headed by *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark*—the deal did at least ensure that the film gained a new lease of life. Hobbs explains,

Eventually Brenison repossessed the film, and sold it to a guy in Hollywood, a film buyer, a very nice guy, really intelligent and very friendly, not a Hollywood type. He owned it for a while but he couldn't sell it to anybody else, then he sold it to the Madame Evira people.

Hobbs remains proud of *Alabama's Ghost*. "It's like the fact that my movie is, well, not funky exactly, but a hit of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and I think

was much more elegant." Oddly, though, he feels the film
 have been better served in another format entirely.
 Danny Selznick, David O. Selznick's son, was a producer at
 and oh boy, he liked my work. He loved
Technique & Talent and he wrote me this wonderful letter. He
 wanted to make it at Universal as animation! He told George
 but Lino was known for making hits outside the
 shirt and he told Selznick he didn't need to take it
 Universal. As animation? What a great idea. And I would
 have done it, because I would have been chief artist, instead
 making Walt Disney cartoons! I'd have made
 these fantastic Hobbs expressionistic drawings, pieces of
 sculpture, and no artist has ever done anything like that. And
 I think I would have been a sensation! he

High Tide on the Desert

After completing *Alabama's Ghost*, but before the film went into production, Hobbs signed a three-picture contract with Robert Bremson. "For me it was fabulous," he recalls, "three pictures at \$200,000 each and I actually got paid and have a nice piece of it too. That was in 1972, so it was pretty good for a low-budget deal. But then, because of the actual failure of *Alabama's Ghost*, they didn't want to go ahead with the other two pictures. Bremson said he would do one of them, he said 'I'll give you one more shot, but not at \$200,000.' So he changed the contract, and he reduced the budget to \$125,000 or \$130,000. I finished at \$135,000, I think, and I put up the overage myself, out of my salary. So I only had one more shot. I didn't have the full three-picture deal. It was up to me to write the original screenplay. I had six months to do it—the whole thing took more or less a year to do the whole project—so I sat in my studio on the hill, out back of Stanford there, the beautiful hill overlooking San Francisco Bay. My mother and stepfather lived farther down the same hill. I had a big studio and a Kentucky racing stable there that I had designed, rebuilt and rebuilt, so I had a really nice place to work. And I wrote a screenplay, originally called *The Secret of Silverdale* (which Bremson liked, and I think it's a good name), and then for various reasons it was turned to *Codomoister of Indian Flats*. Don't ask me how that happened, the idea was to make it more commercial.

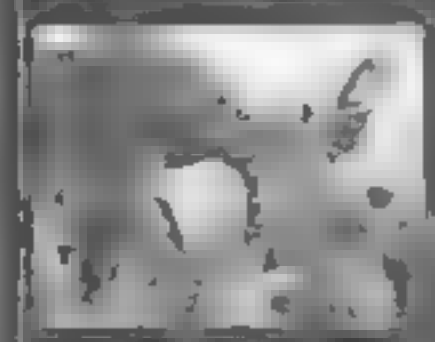
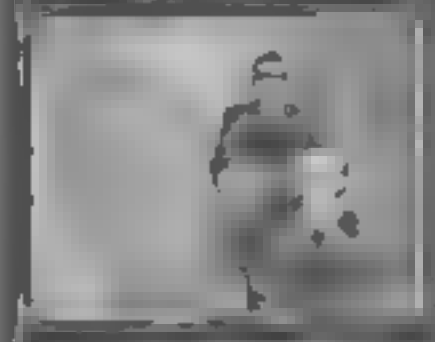
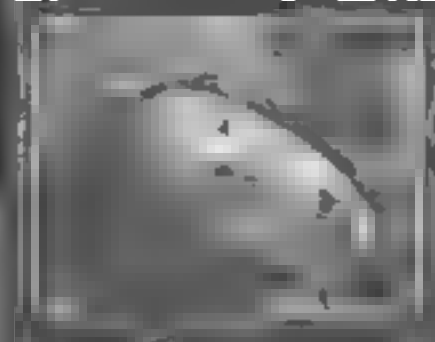
I ended with a sudden decline in budget. Hobbs made the inspired decision to shoot in the small town of Virginia City, Nevada, a ghost town turned tourist attraction outside of Reno. It was a place Hobbs knew intimately. "Warren Puckette⁶ and I had written a big hardback book for Houghton, a famous publisher, called *The Richest Place on Earth: The Story of Virginia City and the Heyday of the Comstock Lode*. It got rave reviews, didn't sell lots, but great reviews. I wrote the second half and Warren wrote the first and I did forty-four drawings for it. It was about the fantastic Comstock Lode, Virginia City, Nevada, which at one time was the richest place on Earth, during the Civil War and afterwards. It was the last period of Romanticism in the American West: a fantastic story. I knew a lot about that, and I was quite involved with various projects in Virginia City. It influenced a lot of my artwork. So I thought, we'll use this place and it'll look like a really expensive movie! The people all said we'd love to be in the film. We paid them a tiny fee, just enough so that everybody participated and the whole town loved the idea of doing it, and they loved that about doing it, it wasn't just some Hollywood yo-yo. They're like artists up there. A lot of artists live in Virginia City, it's

sort of an artists' colony during the summer I thought, what a great idea. I can take the story and history of Virginia City and bring a contemporary monster movie into this fantastic historic landmark where thousands of tourists come every year. During Bonanza Days, in the summer, it's a tourist attraction. They have three hundred people who actually live there and they wear costumes, you know Western costumes so you have all these extras and all these crowds. They have camel races up here too, because camels used to bring the water and ice, because the mines were so hot. So I decided we'll shoot it all during that time, as much of it as we can. I'll work that into the script.

As Hobbs already knew the Virginia City trustees clearance for filming was easy. Virginia City is full of old houses. You know the use of my art, my books. I did a lot up there. We did some restoration of old buildings, and we had a company. I was a leader, I'd been going up there and having a great time in all the old saloons, this was in the days when I used to drink, which is many years ago. All those houses you see were all restored. And they had whorehouses that were legal! And they still do. Not right in the town, but they used to have them in the town. The whorehouses used to be on D Street but now they've moved down the canyon. You know, Italian fellows run them, but Nevada's known for that. We didn't make a big deal of it, although we had a Madame character."

For Doctor Clemens's scientific base, Hobbs used a striking old concrete edifice at the edge of the town: "Yeah, the place that looks like the Roman Coliseum." It's called American Flats. Not many people know about it. It's the American Cyanide Factory, and cyanide is how they used to separate the silver from the gold in the early twenties. The bonanza days were all over and all they had were ~~mountains~~ mounds, these enormous mounds, stories high, of tailings. They're called, which is what's left over after all the cyanide has been used, it's what's left. And they call it a dump, but the dump is still worth money. Because you can distill enough to refine silver from the tailings.

For his *dramatis personae*, Hobbs began with a corrupt Mayor Silverdale. "I made this Machiavellian mayor who is partly my grandfather, who was a fantastic old cap'n - I'm very close to me, who helped bring me up. He was an outrageous character. So I used him, Robert F. Hobbs Jr. and the famous writer Lucius Beebe, to make this character Silverdale. Beebe had lived up there and started the *Territorial Enterprise*, which is the paper Mark Twain worked on briefly. We used Lucius Beebe's Ross Royce in the last scene. So the mayor Silverdale, wants to keep the town as a historic landmark where he can move and walk around in his costume and all the people have to do the same, and he's actually quite a fascist as it turns out. And he's paranoid - Silverdale is so paranoid he's even spying on the dump. You know, he's got surveillance on the town dump. Then we just used the idea of a billionaire Rupert Reach, based on Howard Hughes, sending a black air force general to buy all the mining leases from these townspeople so he could strip-mine the area. It's a terrible ecological thing, illegal, but they do that to the mines up there. All the ghost mines are there, huge piles of tailings all over the Comstock Lode. Hughes, of course, was involved in Nevada - the Hoover Dam, the Flamingo and gambling, the El Rancho Vegas. There are fantastic stories about him. Then I got E. Kerrigan Prescott in there, and people from the Magic Theater. Prescott played the part of the professor who finds relics, old pieces of a strange creature in



Who's the Ghostiest with the Mostes

If there's one thing that grabs the attention of the curious when it comes to *Godmonster of Indian Flats* it's the monster itself. Not just any old monster, of course, not in a Hobbs film, this is a ten foot mutant sheep that walks on its hind legs and looks as though it's been created by dipping a flayed animal carcass into a giant candy-floss machine. Sculptural, yet chaotic, the 'Godmonster' is the director's favourite movie mutants: simultaneously grotesque, pitiful and ingenious.

The monster movies of the 1970s work on a 1950s template – films like *The Crater Lake Monster*, *Bog*, *Creature from Black Lake*, and *Monstro* either take the dinosaur-cum-fishman epics of the past, or take the Bigfoot legends as their template. So what inspired Hobbs to choose a sheep – surely one of Mother Nature's least threatening offspring – as the springboard for his film? Surprisingly, the decision does have a rational basis, as Hobbs explains. "Okay, there was a local legend about a mine monster, so I used that, but it was my idea to make him look the way he looks. I said, what kind of monster could it be? I don't know how to make monsters, I can draw them, I can paint and I can sculpt them, so I'm going to make a Hobbs sculpture of a giant sheep, because probably if there was such a monster first, these miners would be hallucinating anyway, and have hangovers, they would see any kind of fantastic thing – so why not have them see a great big fucking sheep? Which is what it could have been because there are sheep ranches all around here. Those guys up there were drunk all the time, they were the best paid miners in the 1860s and 70s. I bet I maybe 30-40 saloons in a street about four blocks long, open all the time 'cause it's Nevada. But it was a hot town there, and then they'd come up and drink a 'twe'd have oysters' Oysters in the desert. They had oysters, and the shells are still down there, by the dump thousands and thousands of oyster shells! Because the richest place on earth, Rothschild, the Scottish bankers, everybody came from all over the world and it was a fantastic place, they had the biggest hotel in the West there, the international which burned down. San Francisco was a shitty little town back then, compared to Virginia City. So I decided that if there was a monster why not a sheep? We used the Episcopal church, we

had the dog funeral, as our production office at the studio, down in the basement where I kept everything. It's an early church and it's in perfect condition. I let the sheep down here, in the darkness of the Episcopal church basement, which kinda kicked. We hoisted the sheep up in the air and they're going, you know

"Baaaaaa!", and we were all wearing black capes to ourselves in shot. We didn't have any money to make these effects, but that didn't stop me because I had to create stuff using magician's techniques, just like we did in *Alabama's Ghost*."

Hobbs is just fabulously patient with those who see monster design: "Some monster people think, 'Oh, what a cheap monster, I don't like it' but the art people, great. Mainly they don't understand the long art they think I did that because I don't know any more, stick the Monster in a museum, as part of a show, and make an ecological point, then people would think, 'Oh, great artwork, nice sculpture'. The monster based on a myth, but I made him from an artistic stand

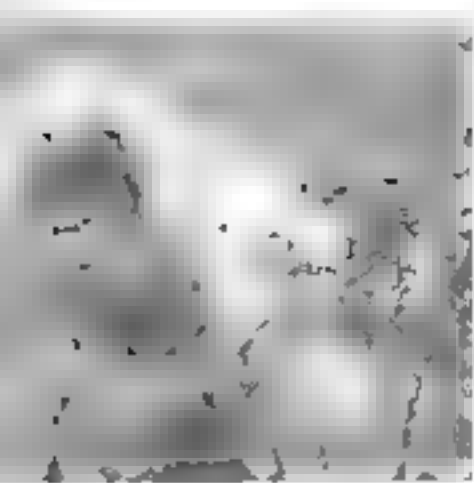


Godmonster of Indian Flats
The monster in the
gas station in the

the mines, and he discovers that the labelled Mine Monster really did exist. The mines for silver are hugely deep, 2,500 feet deep and very dangerous. They were some of the most famous engineering feats of the 19th Century, and the wealth they created built San Francisco. We went and shot in one of the small ones, we didn't go in the big ones.

After the drubbing *Alabama's Ghost* received for its perceived racial insensitivity, Hobbs could have been forgiven for overdoing the racial tolerance angle with his next film. That he doesn't do so, but instead incorporates Christopher Brooks into the story without making an issue of his colour, is probably as clear a signal of Hobbs's true feelings on the subject as you could wish, certainly a more sincere approach than concocting some earnest panegyric on the subject of integration. Once again, Brooks plays someone who would not impress the 'positive discrimination' Hobbs. But as Hobbs points out, "Barnstable is not a bad guy, he's just a tool of Rupert Reich. Someone once said that they liked that I never made an issue out of the fact I was using a black actor. I didn't do it that way to get reviews, but I'm really happy that people think that about it. You know, they come into the bar and ask 'Where's Barnstable, which one is he?' and he's at the other end of the bar, and someone says, 'He's over there, he's the guy in the purple shirt'."

Hobbs is unfailingly appreciative of his cast. "The Hobbs troupe, who played in all my films, they liked working with me and I liked working with them. We were all friends, you know, like Al [Lancaster] and his casts. Stuart Lancaster as the mirror did a great acting job, he was in a lot of Russ Meyer films too. He was a well-known actor in Hollywood. He was a legitimate star, he did Shakespeare, he did everything, a very fine actor. And guess who he was? The grandson of John Ringling North, who founded the circus! Russ Meyer loved him, he learned his lines perfectly, and he loved making these real offbeat movies. He was a great guy."



as opposed to a latex copy of King Kong or something like that. I made him a really distorted fucked-up sheep. He's had a bad childhood, right? [laughs]. He's stuck in that lab and they're tweaking him with things. The early version in the lab he looks like a giant roast beef, somebody said. And then he breaks out, and he's so unhappy about how the humans are treating him that the first thing he does is blow up the oil station. So he goes on the rampage and the people form a posse, and lasso him. I hired these trick riders who worked for Howard Hawks in the famous westerns. They were out there, they loved to do it, and they did it just for screen credit. So they were all real guys. But I based it all on history, or things that could or did happen, not just some bullshit Mickey Mouse monster movie, right? Everybody played it seriously. Now the best scene in the whole movie is the capture of the monster. You really feel sorry for him. I put that stuff inside him and made it yellow, that was a stylistic thing. I didn't want it to just look like guts, I wanted it yellow, as a symbolic link to the sulphur and phosphor gas. But also we had cow's entrails for the scene in the cage. I wanted a lot more of that but they wanted a 'PG' rating. It could have been much more horrific, in my opinion.

The Cult Revolution and Its Discontents

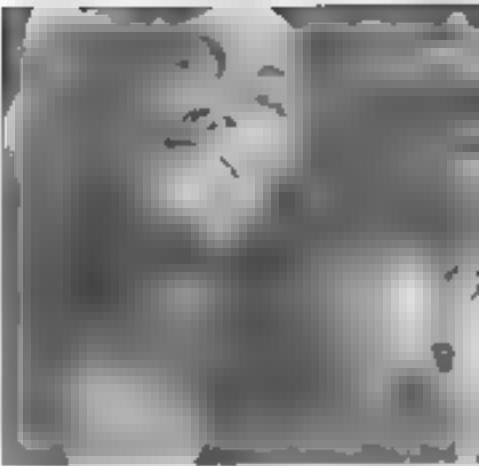
Hobbs has strong views on the way his films have been commented upon and criticised over the years: "We had a screening of *Godmonster* in San Francisco in one of the theatres, five or six hundred people, and they filled out cards and nobody said anything bad about the monster. The only thing they said was they thought you'd have to be intelligent to understand the movie. We had a lot of comments like that, that it was a little bit too intellectual for the monster-movie market. And I take credit for that. The idea was very ecological, because the monster blows up the Standard Oil station! The Americans, some of them said that, but I should think the English do, because they're keen to dialogue! The monster blows up Standard Oil, do you maybe think that with all the symbolism that's in that fuckin' movie, don't you think they'd see that? [laughs] It's been said that my stuff is so dense with visuals, images one after another after another, that people get into it and they don't know where the hell they are. But they're in it. But they don't pay attention to all the details. People have said, 'Why does everyone go crazy at the end?' Well, it's all the dialogue – they've been bad! Even the distributor, who's a smart guy, said, 'Everybody goes nuts at the end! Is that what you always do, Hobbs?' In every movie you make everybody always goes nuts at the end!" I said, 'No, for chrissakes listen to the dialogue!' It's in there, people in the crowd shouting 'Silverdale's got out!'

But you know what? The images were so strong that nobody listened. That's why some of my movies fail in some things. People say, 'Oh the story's weak, Hobbs, I know how to fix it.' [laughs] It's true. My imagery is so powerful that they can't listen. So we added lines, my ex-wife screamed a few lines in there, so now you can hear a few more lines. The failure of *Godmonster* was heartbreaking to me. They were all friends of mine, I lived up there a lot. But the failure of it meant that I really didn't want to do any more movies. Later, we were going to get Michael Caine, which almost worked, to play Howard Hughes. We were going to try and buy the picture back from the guys who eventually bought

it, and redo it and try to get Caine to just do a couple of days as Howard Hughes, manipulating the whole thing, and we were going to re-release it.

Sadly, these plans came to naught and *Godmonster* fell into obscurity, until it turned up on the Something Weird catalogue, becoming Hobbs's one and only DVD release to date. With the rights having long since passed from his hands, Hobbs has never seen a penny, of course, from the film's digital rebirth, but at least now the film into which he poured so much of his creative energy has travelled the world and taken up residence in the dreams of a small but appreciative international audience. What's perhaps bitter-sweet is that, for Hobbs, his work's integrity can get swept away in a torrent of 'bad movie' website reviews and R-sch-loving condescension.

The dust has settled, the drugs don't work, the dreams of the sixties are over. Culture has moved on. The terrain is unrecognisable. Whatever context audiences might have brought to a Hobbs film in the early 1970s has been overwritten by thirty years of cult, camp, irony, parody, pastiche, postmodernism. So how does he feel about being thought of as a wacky-weirdo cult director? How does he feel about the difference between the serious attention accorded to his art, and 'the rather more irreverent attitude extended to his films?' For once, Hobbs is moved to respond directly. "Well, I'd like to see them make a movie on \$55,000! You can't just be crazy. It takes ingenuity. You ask an interesting question. How do I feel about it? Greatly disappointed, because nobody got it, had the time, and the way it was distributed was so bad, so cruel – but that's always the story with anything avant-garde or different or independent. You're just lucky if anything happens. But I didn't make a film that was saleable enough. I didn't know how to do that, although today maybe I would. But my films were done so cheaply. They said, 'Hobbs does his films for the price of the light-bulbs!' They ridiculed them, because



Enya Gavin (Rusa Me) her cameo appearance



Rusa Me (Enya Gavin) her cameo appearance





Original poster for Godmonster of Indian Wells, showing the monster in its most stretched form

Hobbs's 78-inch sculpture of a monster shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1960-61



made or I might have had to do something – didn't want to do. So in order to have the freedom to do anything, I had to make 'em cheap. My feeling is that, you know, I had my chance. I was young, but it wasn't like Coppola going in there and getting UCLA guys and major studios to let him make movies for \$700,000. He didn't have to worry about the actors; he had real actors, right? He didn't have to talk for the material to somebody who's a stage actor, at best. Stage actors, remember – you are not screen actors. My actors were young theatre actors. They weren't film actors. They would overact, but that's okay. I just made it part of the style and did it anyway. It's expressionistic theatre. But imagine what you could do with real actors! I would have written it differently too. So my films were cheap, and the acting's a bit over the top, but my creativity, nobody who knows anything attacks that! If you take the most successful parts of the films, and put them together with the art, it makes perfect sense. But if you put all the films up there as these movies by a low-out filmmaker, it just doesn't seem to make it.

Part of the problem understanding Hobbs's films has always been the lack of background information. When we see a perplexing painting in a gallery we turn to notes and brochures to orientate ourselves with historical context, or the artist's background and intentions, before returning to the image itself. Without such map references, audiences for Hobbs's films today can be forgiven for stepping back, bemused, struggling to engage. I always give primacy to the

biographical context (surely in these over-stimulated times the most luxurious way of encountering a work of art). But I also know that if *Albatross's Ghost* had been the work of a black director – a possibility I considered for a time before speaking to Hobbs in person – my perspective on the film would be quite different. Sad, but true.

Maybe it's not so sad: no artwork is an island. The pungent imagined aroma of hashish and incense drifting from the screen in *Roseland* and *Albatross's Ghost* makes it hard for us to get a grip on what we're seeing. And given that the films have a satirical slant (well outside the norm for the horror genre), the need for a compass is all the more acute. Hobbs the artist; Hobbs the filmmaker; Hobbs the intransigent interviewee; Hobbs the reluctant star. Hopefully these facets, shown here, help his horror films to resonate more clearly. He's an American original – I know, but what the hell – and the horror genre needs men like him, as much as it needs its one-eyed fans and dynamic entrepreneurs. Hobbs's creative trioka is anger, horror, humour – all of which can be found in abundance in his work. Attempts to read his films without

recourse to all three are doomed to failure, which of the trioka gains ascendancy is entirely up to you. He is currently working on a script called *A Tale of Two Cats* (revisiting themes from his 1993 book *William, the Zen Cat*), concerning felines who save the director's life and possess esoteric knowledge. It's a project that sounds ideally suited to animation, and given Hobbs's enthusiasm for the idea of an animated *Albatross's Ghost* it would be fascinating to see how his formidable drawing skills could be marshalled into a feature. One thing's for certain, whether live action or cartoon, *A Tale of Two Cats* would have little in common with such anthropomorphized animalies as *Babe* or *The Aristocats*, and everything to do with Hobbs's own unique film universe.

NOTES

1 The title of a Frank Zappa album, *Free Your Mind... And Your Ass Will Follow* (released in 1971). As a piece of hippie jargon it may have been in West Coast currency for a while before that, but I've been unable to verify it.

2 Robert Almsdel has previously shot a promotional for Vincente Minnelli's Burton-Taylor film *The Sandpiper* (1964) called *The Big Sur* (1965), which explored the Monterey coastal region where Minnelli's film was made, and depicted the artists and Bohemians who worked there.

3 *The Deepest* by Arnold Passman covers the early days of Top 40 radio, up to the beginnings of Progressive Rock on FM. From the Encyclopaedia Britannica online: "Arnold Passman's *The Deepest* (1971), was the first attempt at a history of radio in the rock era. Although its writing style is dated and often guilty of overreaching and preaching, it covers most of the pioneer disc jockeys and the major issues."

4 Lord Buckley (Richard Myrie Buckley) 5 April, 1906 – 12 November 1960. Comedian, monologist, hipster and jazz-age icon whose verbal flights of fancy incorporated black slang, beatnik speak, 'scat' interjections and the rarefied lingo of the *Esquire* of the 1930s.

5 The 18th Century composer Joseph Haydn.

6 The founder of *Ramparts*, a political and literary review magazine published between 1962 and 1975.

7 *Roseland* is available as a DVD-R from Something Weird, but has not been spruced up for an 'overground' release.

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To Sleep, Perchance to Scream

George Barry on the making of *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats*

Death Bed: The Bed That Eats (1977)

At the age of 22, in 1977, George Barry, a young, odd mansion, has a strange stone building with just a single room. In the room sits a big old-fashioned bed. Created by a demon, the bed is alive, and seeks the blood and life essence of unwary travellers. On the wall nearby hangs a painting. Behind it, the painting's long-dead Artist (Dave Marsh) sits, imprisoned; he's been there for sixty years. Unable to intervene, he watches as a young couple enter the room and he down. Yellow foam emerges from the bedspread, and the couple are sucked into a liquid core. With a burp, the monster is ready for its next meal. For the rest of the film, interspersed with flashbacks explaining the history of the bed, we follow the fortunes of three young women: confident, practical Diane (Denene Hall); nervous, withdrawn Suzan (Julie Ratter); and detached, supercilious Sharon (Rosa Luxemburg). One by one they are attracted to the bed. First to die is Suzan, who is asleep and suffers nightmares created by the bed. Diane is next, dragged to her doom by a bed sheet tentacle. Sharon's brother arrives and tries to save Diane but, after reaching into the bed's stomach, he's left with skeleton hands, and slumps into depression. The bed's only weakness is Sharon.

George Barry's bizarre and beguiling *Death Bed* is a fairytale horror story, merging surreal humour, private poetry, and a blithe disregard for the essential strangeness of its own ideas. Rough around the edges, off and away in its own world, it's a precious slice of low-budget madness that reminds us what we've lost in the current overpolished and creatively impoverished horror genre.

I first saw *Death Bed* in 1988. Stefan Jaworzyn, the editor of *Shock Ypress*, discovered it in a cheap video sale and recommended that I give it a try. I watched it at his house one Sunday afternoon, and it knocked me out. 'Who on Earth is George Barry?', we wondered, after sitting there, jaws agape, dreary Sunday dispelled by this shaft of seventies ghostlight. 'How did such a movie get made?' Not only was it an uncommonly strange piece of work, but

there was virtually no information about the production on either the film or its sleeve. The video, from the ultra-obscure Port and label, had amusingly cheesy cover artwork but was completely devoid of credits. The film print did at least carry the words '(c) George Barry 1977', but that was all. Where normally you'd expect the names of cast and crew, the screen offered blackness, with only the word 'Credits' hovering, bereft of the promised information. The effect was so opaque, so mysterious, that you felt both laughter and frustration bubbling up. The mystery only intensified as the film gathered momentum, shifting unpredictably from creepy comedy to poetic folk tale to surreal horror: the mood ricocheted between registers in a way that defied categorisation, either as mind-warped outsider art, insane student project, or exploitation film gone haywire. When I saw it I thought, 'I must find out who made this!' But no one knew anything about *Death Bed*: the video label had disappeared, the name 'George Barry' was anonymous enough to belong to a thousand Americans. And so the trail went cold.

Death Bed's British video release in the mid-1980s was, to say the least, under-reviewed. The fanzines were still bedazzled by the more extreme end of the horror spectrum, and we were all rather heavily preoccupied with obtaining an *Apocalypse Now* or a complete set of the *Itsa* films. To notice *Death Bed* you needed to tune your mental wireless away from the noisy gore frequencies to a stranger, more elusive position on the dial, in the space between stations, where the shipping forecasts, foreign signals and dream voices live.

In the days before the internet, most who saw the film knew nothing about it. That in itself wasn't unusual: in the early 1980s, countless films were released on video without fanfare or context. They would enter your life with the enigma of an archaeological relic, albeit, in this case, a relic that flirted with the nonsensical and the silly, and sometimes veered towards sheer baloney. Baloney? Am I being 'bad' here, a dog's dinner of cheap turkey to be chewed up and spat out on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*? From the title and synopsis, you could be forgiven for

Picture: *Death Bed*



here's another. She's been brought to you." It's pointless in plot terms (the scene is dubbed over a simple scene of Suzan and Sharon in the woods) but the casual offhanded way it's said feels as if we're picking up a stray, idle thought. It's effortlessly weird and hilarious.

When it comes to pacing, most horror films have an attack-and-subside rhythm, building towards a grand finale. *Death Bed*, on the other hand, has a gentle rhythm without the obvious spikes for which even the crudest horror directors aim. There's no suspense and there's certainly no sense of the story being manipulated towards a climax. For some viewers this may be unsatisfying, but if you're ever so slightly fed up of being marched through film narratives, trotted through them like a ped gree that is a dog-show. *Death Bed*'s loose-leash approach is a chance to relax and try something different.

Death Bed deals in transcendental mysteries: the impossible geometry of the bed, bigger on the inside than the outside, the occult means by which it is created and destroyed, but Barry summons his demons from a fantasy world disconnected from religious tradition, telling a story of demonic seduction that has nothing to do with the Church. Barry signals this twice: when Suzan's neck is sawed by the chain of her crucifix pendant, pulled back and forth across her throat by the bed's power, and during a flashback showing a clergyman dying in the bed while reciting the Halleluiah. Both scenes leave us in no doubt that the bed is unaffected by the paraphernalia of Christian faith.

You aim for the grotesque. You're nothing if you're not grotesque, except hungry, of course. The Artist
I have one aim: the grotesque. If I am not grotesque I am nothing. Aubrey Beardsley.

Throughout the film, poetic images allow the slender narrative thread to take a back seat. In this, Barry is akin to French director Jean Rollin (*Death Bed* would make a lovely double bill with Rollin's *La rose de fer*). We see blood blossom from the eye socket of a skull in the bed's fluid interior, roses blooming from the same skull, now magically buried in the soil outside, a shattered mirror fragmenting a face into kaleidoscopic collage, and the pages of a book turn into mirrors that capture the flames of fire. Such imagery suggests the Romantic tradition, as befits the Artist behind the glass, one a fey whisper caught halfway between English Gothic and the Scandinavian Symbolists.

Surrounded by my paintings, I decided to draw my death.

So says the Artist, looking around him at the wails where Aubrey Beardsley's 'The Dancer's Reward', 'The Woman in the Moon' and 'The Kiss' are displayed. Beardsley was born on 2 August, 1872 and died from tuberculosis in France, on 16 March, 1898. He became notorious for his illustrations in two 'decadent' periodicals of the period, *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*. His designs for books such as the banned *Saturne* of Oscar Wilde added to his notoriety, and his major works include the illustrations for *Le mort d'Arthur*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *Lysistrata* and *Ulysses*.

I've been imprisoned behind my painting in this frame for a year or now, since my death.

So is this really Beardsley? Well, after he says he hasn't had a cigarette in seventy years, which, given that the shoot began in 1972, is near enough Beardsley's date of death. Certainly the actor looks the right age: Beardsley died young at the age of 25. How he got from France to the United States is debatable, but the bed *does* have transcendental powers.

You gaze at me as a painting on the wall, and I see you serving upon some monstrous silver platter.

But if the Decadent and Symbolist movements provide stimulus and imagery, so too does the world of fairytales. The picnic baskets from which people take food, or from which Sharon's brother produces a knife, spin us back to Red Riding Hood, in which a bed is of course a central prop. The entrance into the bed-chamber involves a flight of four, descending, Alice-like, from halfway up the wall. And as in fairytales, the fixations are basic: food (the bed's constant hunger, the first two victims and their spoiled meal of fried chicken, Suzan's nightmare about eating bug pupae), sleep, of course, from whence dreams and sickness), sex (the bed pants like a dirty old man when Suzan gets undressed; a flashback shows a 'religious revivalist orgy' in the bed); and death. There's also a fascination with reversal: the undersides of things, turning things topsy-turvy. The Artist lives behind the painting instead of in front of it, the fire in the reflection is upside down, Diane is sucked into the bed through the underside, victims are seen upside-down as they fall into the bed's interior.

A demon residing in a tree, on a whim changed himself into a breeze. While in this state he drifted one morning by a young maiden. He circled around, and back surrounding her in his form. Gently he blew through her hair, her mind, and her dreams. For her seduction he decided to create a bed, unique for the occasion. But something tragic happened. Though he was a man in shape, he was still a demon, unnatural to her and she died. [His eyes turned cold, shattered in their grief. Tears of blood fell onto the bed.] *The blood left behind took root into the bed, and from this root a life sprang, and with this life, a hunger.*

The best movies leave something elusive behind, a lingering haze that drifts through the mind like Haven Cranspie's "haunting refrain": a special something that seems to dance out of reach when you look directly at it. There are skilled directors out there whose work, for all its craft, will never possess this quality, which is a dream quality and far from common. *Death Bed* is steeped in this otherness, even though its conventional imaginations are blatantly obvious. It's in this way that such a cheaply produced film, made at the very fringes of the industry, can stay with you after a major production has hurried faceless out of your memory. The lines crossed by *Death Bed* are an index of its eeriness. Set in the twilight between categories—between comedy and horror, art and mass, mundane and insane—it draws on energies less more sensible films. How great to see it emerge at last, a dream thought lost and forgotten, now revived in miraculous detail on DVD. Here's to the unique and lingering spell of *Death Bed*.



good for a
night's
sleep



Detroit, the centre of America's auto industry, is not the first place you'd think of when trying to place the provenance of *Death Bed*: a film whose blend of cool, faintly ominous countryside locations, crumbling stone houses and decadent daydreams seems to float in some sylvan limbo, far from the smoke of industry. Rock music is more in keeping with Detroit's image. Ted Nugent, Bob Seger, Alice Cooper, Glenn Frey of The Eagles, all came from the city, and lush, heavy rockers The MC 5 typify the sort of aesthetic experience one expects from a town with motor oil running through its veins. Detroit's Motown label, too, of course, has typically been identified with the city and industrialisation: that factory or production line moving cartoon metaphors for the company's unstoppable momentum. Berry Gordy Jr established his musical empire in a poky Detroit house he dubbed 'Hitsville

U.S.A.' and many of the artists who made Motown famous, including the Four Tops, Smokey Robinson and Diana Ross, hailed from the city.

Nevertheless, *Death Bed*'s director George Barry was born on 21 August, 1949 in Royal Oak, a suburb of Detroit where he still lives today. In film terms, his most significant neighbour was Sam Raimi, also born in Royal Oak, who began working on his *Evil Dead* dry-run, *Within the Wood* around the same time that Barry was completing his only film to date, *Death Bed*. You couldn't ask for a greater contrast in fortunes: Raimi scored a cult success with *The Evil Dead*, and went on from there to become a Hollywood giant, director of the *Spider-Man* movies, and one of the biggest wheels in popular cinema; George Barry was, until quite recently, one of the least-fied directors imaginable: in fact, he was a complete unknown in America. *Death Bed* was only released – very briefly, on video – in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Spain. Barry, though, was totally unaware of even this small exposure. In the early 1980s he'd sent the answer print of his movie, which was still without credits at the time, to a small L.A. company who said they were interested in obtaining U.K. video rights. He was offered \$1,000 for a finished video master. Barry, though, was chronically short of cash and unable to shoot the missing credits, for which he needed estimated \$3,000. The answer print was promptly returned and that seemed to be that. What Barry *didn't* know was that the interested party had pirated a video master-copy of *Death Bed* before sending it back. It was by this route that *Death Bed* snuck out onto tape in Great Britain in the mid-1980s, on the supremely obscure 'Port and' label.¹ No Suteside deal was ever signed, and no bootleg ever ventured onto the shelves there.

But we're jumping too far ahead. Let's return to 1951 Detroit, and meet George Barry, a young boy fascinated by the monsters and flickering shadows of the cinema. Our guide: Mr Barry himself.

"I never thought of myself as being particularly artistic."

"By the mid-1950s I was old enough to go to the movies on my own," Barry begins, "as late as 1956 I can still remember struggling to stay awake to see *Island Earth* all the way to the end. The flaming spaceship streaking to its doom over the ocean, and the contrast of the colour of the water and the colour of the night surrounding the outdoor drive-in screen. That was yesterday, or the day before, and I was five years old. I'm eight or ten years old and that is distant history because I'm watching TV and the images are so black and white and grey, but no less important. I was on a Friday night and I'm watching *Shock Theater*. Universal horror films of the thirties and forties. Maybe I'll struggle to stay awake – I'll drink a lot of Pepsi to help me manage. Better than drinking coffee to I stay awake during your college classes, since the education of the *Shock Theater* classes will stay with me."

For anyone old enough to remember life pre-recollections of the cinema are a waxy, bittersweet affair: much of the magic has been lost. Barry describes the allure of a trip to the movies, pre-video: "Royal three movie houses – generally showing double bill – often changed twice a week. The heyday of the theatres was over, their numbers were dwindling, the

didn't know this as a kid. In a few years I would be taking the bus to downtown Detroit, where the big old movie houses, true picture palaces even in decay, were still thriving. In downtown Detroit there was also the terrible lure of the smaller, even more run-down triple houses, some open twenty-four hours a day. You could sit in on an evening, catch the last showing of the current movie bill and somewhere around midnight the new triple bill would start. One ticket, six movies, heaven on earth. In the early morning hours, I saw *Blow-Up* in such a theatre, the Colonial (God have mercy on you if you had to use the rest room). In the row in front of us, an older German, a railway worker by his dress, explained the movie to the empty seat next to him. It seemed to me he had a clearer understanding of the film than the vast majority of critics at the time, at least judging by their

Barry began making films in the late 1960s while taking Arts and Philosophy courses at Wayne State. "Like many at that time, I started making films in college," he explains, "though I didn't go to college to make films. Students interested in film were more likely to enroll in a Humanities class. It was not a bustling centre of student filmmaking there was far more activity in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan. But there was a small film department, offering one or two standard film history courses and a couple of substandard film production

courses. Unintended, Barry began working on short films, his own and others, in 16mm black-and-white. "People seemed to work in either 16mm black-and-white or Super 8. 16mm colour was too expensive and the jump to stereo sound was a big one. Film projects often received a class credit though their subject matter seldom had much to do with the class. This was the sixties of course and everything was everything, the usual mixture of social realism, predictable politics, lame jokes and well-worn clichés. The work itself could be great and

Barry's early 16mm efforts are lost, presumed destroyed, but he has been kind enough to dredge up these sections. A telephone call to an old friend and classmate, Tom Dalton, heaped some details back into a semblance of order, resulting in the following synopsis for Barry's first short narrative film, shot "no later than 1971. It irresistibly monitored *Night of the Garbage*

Barry, a clue where any of the footage for this project is, or even if it still exists. Here's what we can remember of the story. We open with our lead (OL) from a window reading his parakeet's suicide note. The bird has hung itself in its cage. His girlfriend tries to console him, but fails. He crumples up the note, tosses it into a corner filled with debris. The apartment is a one room, no dress-at-the-door unwashed-clothes strewn about, posters-on-the-walls, no furniture affair. OL, would at that time, be described as an underachiever, hiding out in college. He leaves by himself, not aware that his parakeet's note is being read in the corner, picked up off the floor by a lizard that appears from a rubbish pile. This is where our memories have hit the wall. The garbage may have come to life through the digestion (or some other chemical process) of roach roaches. In fact OL may have been smoking as he was reading the note and had thrown the roach into the corner before he tossed the note. The roach's first appearance may have been to retrieve the still-smoking, followed by puffs of smoke rising out of the

corner. What follows next, we can't remember. By the time OL may have realised his garbage had taken on a separate existence. Let's define "Garbage". The "Garbage" was not only waste paper, old food, used prophylactics, and broken glass strings, but an assortment of all his material possessions: his books, records, clothes, letters, photos. OL may be pursuing his girlfriend at this point. The Garbage is drinking, socialising and OL discovers that his friends like his Garbage better than they like him. We shot a line-up scene. The Garbage has filed a harassment complaint against him. The Garbage lets him off the hook, by purposely failing to identify him. Barry pauses. "You've guessed the end by now. OL dejectedly goes back home to discover his girlfriend, with his Garbage. She's much happier now, so OL takes his dead bird, still hanging in its cage, and departs unnoticed."

Tom Dalton, who helped out on the project, adds: "The memory which sticks with me was rushing into the drugstore on campus, running up to the pharmacist and demanding five condoms - And in a hurry. (For he had to be in a hurry, to be coated with Karp syrup.) And then the trips to a few pet shops, asking if they had any recently deceased parakeets. I think it was after I found myself lingering by a cage with a rather sickly looking bird that I came back to suggest we stick with the fake one."

While the special effects - essentially a chicken-wire mesh contraption covered in garbage with an actor inside - were fairly crude, Barry nevertheless remembers that the garbage creature cut a certain dash. "Clad as it may be to the eye, it didn't look too bad on film, and we were not seeking realism anyway. It looked better than the *Creeping Terror* carpet monster, which I know is hardly reason to rejoice, but again, that really didn't matter."

The results of his labours assured Barry that film was worth pursuing. "The close-up foot of the parakeet hanging in its cage looked great," he remembers. "In fact, someone watching the rushes got upset with us, thinking we had put to death a real bird. I remember the footage from the opening scene looking as good as anything we shot, and I think the scene may have played well. I can't recall who played OL, but his girlfriend Val was a classmate of mine. Val photographed like a dream. She did the scene topless and was just fetching. That was a problem with a lot of student films, many had a self-righteous, self-important air with noticeable lack of entertaining, exploitive elements. That's not to say a lot of the stuff I worked on at the time was goofy, parody stuff. Though goofy, parody, twist material seemed to suit the shorter film project better. I later saw a film that used a parakeet or canary suicide/hanging joke. The joke played, and I regretted not finishing my film up."

Sadly, despite a week's filming, *Night of the Garbage* never did make it to the finish line. "We shot about forty minutes of footage," says Barry, "and we processed what we had, but the film was never cut. There might not have been even a rough assemblage, although we thought of *Night* as a fifteen-minute film. Some of it looked okay, but I thought we had less than half of what we needed to finish. A few hundred dollars had been spent and I figured it would take another thousand dollars to complete. So that's where the film was left. Not that I gave up on it right away. For a while I intended to get back to it but I never did."





including *The Bugs Bunny Video Show*, *Popeye's Cartoon Show*, and *Film Fun!* a collection of Laurel & Hardy shorts with adult cartoons. Surely not all of these can "satisfy adult demand?" Note: Francis

1970, when producer [name] has discovered that [name] later re-issued the film in a cut and re-edited version, in a plain carton with a red sticker bearing the synopsis and title

shot of Susan (Julie Riker), who slips into [name] dreams while sleeping in the bed before being consumed and spat out through some mysterious dimensional back door into



Delving back even further in time, Dalton recalls that *Night of the Garter* had its roots in a class project to which Barry was assigned, based on what would now be called "green issues." Not so easily corralled, Barry had made a five-minute 16mm black-and-white silent short entitled *Mundo Cruel*, which extolled the virtues of pollution. "I guess I was sophomoric even then," deadpans Barry. "Though I still try to harbour the illusion that once I was a serious person. Young people are supposed to be serious, right? It's only when you get old, you're supposed to get foolish. *Mundo Cruel*. I'm told, successfully screened on campus, along with a live musical accompaniment, on the same bill with Warhol's *Blue Boy*. Still, Hollywood failed to call."

In 1971, with his degree on hold (permanently as turned out), Barry began to contemplate directing a full-length feature. His first impulse was to make a horror film, though he also toyed briefly with the idea of sexploitation. "The hardcore *Alma the Virgin* [dir. Howard Zechin, 1970] had just been released," says Barry. "I was told by someone to call 'Uncle Tiny,' a friendly fellow who owned a sexploitation house on the West Coast." He confirmed that hardcore had just about taken over the market, and I went off the sexploitation idea. The only project I would have even considered shooting hardcore was *Weekend at Emily's*, a bouncy, literary sex romp graphically detailing the love-life we thought Emily Dickinson should have had. Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman dropped in too, though old Walt might have been problematical relative to market requirements. But I wasn't going to shoot a hardcore sex film, and *Weekend* wasn't really a serious project. There was a script we had that bordered on hardcore due to the nature of the story. A woman has her teeth sharpened to help her to bite off the genitals of a fellow she has issues with. She does this, and is happy in her revenge. He is happy too, since the castration leads to his spiritual renewal. I know, this sounds terribly arty, filthy, Abélardly, and it may very well have been, though I wrote it as more of a mood piece with the emphasis on a series of obsessive, fetishistic images."

Turning back to the horror genre, though not entirely abandoning the erotic themes he'd been toying with, Barry decided to build a story around a dream he'd had about an engulfing, possibly carnivorous bed.

Making the Bed

But what kind of horror film to make? Barry describes the process of elimination: "Okay, a horror film. *Willard* opened big, let's do a *Willard* rip-off. If you don't have money, you can't have shame. We were just about to buy the rights (for \$1,000 – the contracts were drawn and everything) to a Thomas Disch short story about a girl and her roaches [*The Roaches*, written in 1965], when, I think, Leonard Kirtman⁴ announced he was going into production on a similar girl and her roaches' story. We backed off and the other film was never made. Just as we're rip-offs are a snooze and I don't much care for roaches. I wrote other script treatments, but we must have decided on *Death Bed* by late '71 or early '72."

Barry decided to go for it. A colour 16mm feature film, a horror story of sorts, to be blown up for theatrical release Part-comic, part-surreal, with the monstrous 'bed that eats' as the focus. Using \$10,000 of his own money, he began work on *Death Bed*, a project that would span five years

and cost around \$30,000. "I'm not good at approaching people for money," he admits, "though at the end, a few investors came in for a few hundred to a couple of thousand dollars. My memory of the production is spending a few thousand dollars at a time, running out of money, then scraping up a few thousand dollars more to get to the next stage."

Shooting commenced at the Gar Wood Mansion outside Detroit in spring 1972, with two days spent filming exteriors. Hired from a rock band who were encamped there at the time, the location was suggested by actor Dave Marsh ("Beardsley" in the film), then working for the music magazine *Creem*; apparently it had already hosted a number of underground music-biz parties. Says Barry, "We shot only two days at the Mansion, since I was worried we might get thrown off the property at any time. A rock band was renting the place, we rented from them and I suspected they didn't have the right to sub-lease. Sure enough, a representative of the owner showed up the morning of the second day, but to my relief, didn't give us any trouble at all. In hindsight, the fellow may have been disappointed we weren't shooting a naked witches' coven scene on the lawn. I was told later that the owner wanted to buy the adjoining properties, so it was in his interest to be as much of a nuisance to his neighbours as possible, thus encouraging them to sell to him. Later, it was rented out to a motorcycle gang: there was a weekend biker party and the place got trashed. In *Death Bed*, a statue at the Mansion weeps blood; later we dissolve to a shot of the broken head of that statue. That was taken from a newspaper photo covering the aftermath of the biker party."

Although not onscreen for very long, the mansion is an excellent location, bringing a decadently aristocratic feel to the film. "It was an odd place," muses Barry. "built by Gar Wood, an inventor who designed and raced speedboats. He could steer one of his speed boats right into the house, an indoor boat dock. The water was closer the old breakwall had failed and the water's edge was getting closer. The marble was quarried and brought over from Italy. A huge impressive ballroom, the full height and nearly the length of the Mansion, almost divided it in two. Gar Wood lived on one side of the ballroom, his wife on the other side. They didn't get along, and that way they wouldn't have to bump into each other unexpectedly in the course of the day. Their son, Gar Wood, Jr., shuttled by a nanny back and forth across the ballroom from one parent to the other, wanted little to do with the Mansion when he grew up. Had I known there would be no trouble from the owner while we shot at the Mansion, I would have adapted the script to the location and extended the shooting time there. But my experience was with productions where there was neither money nor influence to secure locations, so I had developed a catch-as-catch-can mentality." (There was a brief opportunity to film inside the Mansion, which Barry quickly exploited for a flashback sequence exploring the bed's origins. We see the bed at one end of the Gar Wood ballroom, a player organ visible in a corner; the French doors to the rear of the bed lead out onto the stone patio seen at the beginning of the film.)

The interior of the small, windowless stone building, which the bed is banished for much of the film, was actually a set built a few miles away, in a studio rented from the film's soundmen, Jim Viola and Tom Sherry. The main bedchamber was located upstairs in their old two-storey commercial/industrial building in Highland Park

“The entire room was a set,” Barry explains, “but most of the brick was real. The fireplace was built into the wall with plastic brick sheeting that we painted. That’s why in at least a shot or two, you can see smoke pouring out into the room, since the fireplace had no venting. In the film, the door to that room was the door to a stone shed in Lapeer, Michigan, some sixty miles away. We actually shot some of the exteriors. The bed met its end in a rock quarry, whose location I can’t remember, though it probably wasn’t any further away than Lapeer.”

The core of the movie was filmed over three-to-four weeks in the spring/summer of 1972—this being the intended duration of the whole shoot. However, delays soon crept in and further filming resumed in the fall of ’72, including key scenes from the fiery climax of the film. Still, there was more to do: in 1973 another weekend shoot was arranged, adding further material. “Going over-schedule meant we had to rethink and rewrite elements of the story that weren’t working,” says Barry. “My script was not a proper shooting script, and we didn’t have a production manager—that was probably my biggest mistake, though I made so many mistakes, it’s hard to rank them. Most of the time, the actors had their lines beforehand, and at times there was some rehearsal. But I think the longer we went on, the less rehearsal there was. Some of this was due to time restraints and exhaustion, but I was also finding I just preferred the unrehearsed or little-rehearsed takes.”

Death Bed’s weird, listless acting performances play a key role in generating the film’s uniquely dislocated atmosphere. Barry explains how they came about: “I remember at the time of shooting, others on the film being concerned about my seeming lack of regard for the flat tone of some of the performances, and I did think, ‘Should I be worried about this?’ But I also remember feeling that while the actors are not in a soap-opera and the troubles their characters face are certainly not standard soap-opera difficulties, the delivery of their lines should still range from low-to-middle soap-opera recitation—earnest and banal. This was more of an instinctual notion, that if the story is a bit off-the-top, the acting should run counter. If the bed is outrageous, the people should be ‘downed out’ a bit. The cast, I’m certain, could have reached more expressive, dramatic characterisations, had they been asked.” And was there any pharmaceutical assistance for the spaced-out performers? Barry laughs: “Substance indulgence? No, not really. One performer may have been under the influence of spirits for a brief period of time, but that’s about it. I knew none of the principals in the cast before *Death Bed’s* pre-production, except for David Marsh, who played Beardsley. It’s odd, in a way, to think of Dave as a principal, since, even though he’s all through the film, he was on the movie for only two days. We always knew someone else was going to do the voice. We cast from the south-eastern Michigan area. Most of the principals may have been in or just out of college at the time: some were theatre students, though I don’t remember if any went to Wayne State. Maybe Rusty did. There were friends, family and crew playing some of the smaller roles. Patrick Spence-Thomas, Beardsley’s voice, and Linda Bond, who played the resurrected girl, were from Canada.

Barry’s offbeat sense of humour is readily apparent in the film, ranging from broad (e.g. when the bed drinks Pepto-Bismol after overdoing it) to surreal (Rusty Russ’s reaction to his skeletal hands). “We were shameless with ‘Monty Python’ cheap laughs,” he admits. “We would

go for a laugh at almost any time, no matter how low. My poor grandmother reading a lurid sex paper in the bed. She wasn’t worried about it, she thought the camera was so far away, no one would be able to tell what she was reading. Now, a guy who would use his own, truly beloved grandmother for a cheap laugh is capable of any crime and that humour.”

On a sabbier note, the loquacious spirit of Aubrey Beardsley—sharing his poetic reminiscences from behind the painting where he’s trapped, adds humour of a different kind: “I was lucky to find Patrick Spence-Thomas,” Barry says. “He was the straight man for the bed. I literally did the film’s sound transfers at his studio in Toronto. He agreed to do the voice of Beardsley, not to mention mixing the soundtrack on spec. Since I never made any money on the film, he never received any payment. At least he’s probably forgotten me, since he had no real cause to forgive me. His voice-over was very good, but I wrote too many bridging passages.”

In a role that seems perfect for the director of such a personal, idiosyncratic film, Barry appears as the demon, seen briefly in a handful of tight facial close-ups—however, he is quick to dispel any impression that he chose this pivotal cameo for artistic reasons: “Yes, I’m the eyes of the demon. But this was not a preconceived cute cameo—we had something else planned but it didn’t work out. I was cheap, available and, as I remember, the only guy around at the time, except for the photographer. We probably should have used someone older. I also did the voice of the gangster. When we were dubbing at the Spence-Thomas sound studio, we ran short on voices. Food was delivered to the studio, so we could work and eat at the same time. I remember someone said one of the devil’s people dubbed one of the characters. I wouldn’t deny it. *Death Bed’s* Canadian assistant cameraman Bob Gallant (who worked on David Cronenberg’s *The Brood*, as best boy) played the demon in a long shot at the end of the film: “Bob died young, in the early- to mid-eighties,” Barry recalls. “I never heard he was so. He was a nice enough looking fellow, but very boyish in appearance, which is why I didn’t use his face for the demon.” As for the bed and its various rumblings—almost certain the bed was voiced by more than one person. Patrick Spence-Thomas may have done the laughs/giggles and some of the bed’s utterances. I may have done the snoring. Ron Medico did a number of voice-over’s as the minister for sure. Jock Brandis [gaffer and special effects man] played the Minister onscreen, making his acting credits *Death Bed* and *Scanners*.

Brandis, seen briefly in the “psychic commune” scene of *Scanners*, worked as a grip on David Cronenberg’s *The Brood*, *Scanners*, *Videodrome* and *The Dead Zone*, as well as David Lynch’s *Bildes* and John Waters’s *Serial Mom*—quite a tally of left-field projects! He also shot a film for Ed Hunt in 1974, called *Diary of a Sinner*. Says Barry: “Jock Brandis left Canada and movie-making a few years back. At the end of the 1960s he met Kurt Vonnegut in Africa. Jock was with a Canadian version of the Peace Corps attached to relief efforts for Biafra, and Vonnegut had flown in to write an article about that nation’s impending fall. Vonnegut said something like, ‘you know, someone like you, who’s been here for a while, should be writing this story’.” Thirty years later Jock did just that, in his novel *The Ship’s Cat* (2000). He also went back to Africa, and his D.Y. attitude—so evident in *Death Bed’s* special effects, has led to a convention which may be a



For the first time, the demon and Linda Bond as the girl who is later resurrected. Galant was assistant cameraman. He and Bond were in a relationship at the time and lived together in Toronto.

Sharon and Diane were dragged into the bed by the demon and Linda Bond.



genuine aid in combating Third World hunger.”⁵ Brandis was responsible for creating the bed’s erupting digestive juices (the stomach itself was housed in a tank downstairs from the bed chamber in the Elwood Park studio-space). The digestive juices, Barry reveals, were a water soap mix, heavy on the soap, with yellow food colouring, bubbled out through an air compressor pump-hung machine. Jock was really invaluable to the film. He was the gaffer, equipment manager, special effects and everything else guy. For instance, the professional stage blood we bought looked awful. So with water, food colour and a little flour, paste, or something, he came up with phoney blood that not only looked okay, but also, when it spilled out and hit the air, would actually darken like coagulated blood.”

The Cronenberg connections keep on coming. *Death Bed* cameraman Robert Fresco shot David Seater’s *Home Aft Ex Hurm* (1965), a Canadian drama which Cronenberg says converted him from a University of Toronto science major into a filmmaker.⁶ Fresco’s subsequent work has largely been in Canadian television and documentaries, the latter including studies of jazz musicians such as Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp and Hugh Masekela. “I had not met Robert Fresco before pre-production on *Death Bed*,” Barry says. “I was up in Toronto to talk to a couple of people and check out some motion picture equipment available for budget rental. Someone connected me to Jock Brandis and I think I initially approached him to be the cameraman. He was reluctant to be the director of photography. I think he was the one who mentioned Robert Fresco, though they may not have had a close personal or working relationship. I can’t remember what I saw of his work, if any, before he agreed to do my movie.”

Among the other friends to have played a part in the making of *Death Bed*, Barry found his girlfriend of the time, Maureen Peacock, invaluable. Her initial role as on-set editor soon grew, Barry admits, to include “endless hours on the film during pre-production and production, taking responsibility for chores far outside an art director’s tasks.”

Bed-Post Production

Although *Death Bed* was edited piecemeal over the years that it was shot, George Barry and his friend Ron Medico, an experienced TV editor, did the fine cutting in about three months during 1976. As Barry recalls, “The editing room was a spare bedroom in my home and the editing bench was an old door set up on sawhorses with square holes cut out, and pillowcases attached to catch the film. Better equipment was available for short stretches, but *Death Bed* was mainly cut on a Moviola Jr., a little known and technically rather limited machine. Using it was, in Barry’s words, “akin to baking a cake over an open fire.”

It wasn’t long before the eponymous bed began to exert its influence on the overall structure of the film. Says Barry, “Whenever we got away from the bed, we seemed to be in trouble. So we cut the footage that seemed too distant from our star” based on a principle of “Cut out what doesn’t work, leave in what does, and do the best with what you’ve got.” When pressed on the unconventional style of the film he adds, “Our ‘practical’ choices came from our tastes and I suppose our tastes weren’t very ‘practical’ at all. Commercial considerations fell by the wayside.” Among the scenes to be dropped were a shower scene and, perhaps most lamentably, a sequence featuring actress Demene Hall participating in dream experiments at a mysterious laboratory. Scenes featuring Rusty Bass and Demene Hall visiting a gay bar were also excised. “The cutting of those scenes, like the dream lab, was to the beginning, was no fault of the cast. They were either ill-conceived, or just didn’t fit in,” says Barry.

Their removal caused a few headaches for editor Ron Medico, when dealing with the scene where Sharon, Suzan and Diane drive out to the mansion. “Ron remembers how he had to push that sequence in the car,” Barry explains. “The trouble was, Diane meets Suzan in the dream lab, and Diane meets Sharon in the gay bar and we cut both those scenes, even though both were shot with synched sound and we had little enough of that. Neither scene was good, but the major problem was we felt they kept the film away from the bed too long. So the girls just show up and their interior car footage became more important than originally intended.” The solution Barry and Medico came up with was to use the car scene for exposition, but by doing it via Suzan’s dazed, cloud-like voice-over, and the strange sideways glances of Sharon and Diane, a creepy sense of paranoia emerged, justifying the new slant and making what could have been a blatant patch-job into something special.

With a rough-cut established, Barry cast around for someone to provide a music track. He eventually turned to Mike McCoy, a tall thin fellow in his twenties who had a hearing aid. When he didn’t want to deal with the recording, he would turn his hearing aid on and listen to the music. Barry says, “Mike did a good job, apart from the music for the opening and end credits. It was my fault. I had asked him to do something of that nature. What was I thinking about? I thought it would be amusing, but it’s not funny ‘strange funny ha-ha’. It’s funny ‘doesn’t work at all!’”

Death Bed would have been better served if the music had been planned earlier and we had given greater attention to it,” Barry says. “Ron and I talked about this in the last year or so. He wishes *Death Bed* had more music.”

to too. I should have had Heardsley talk less, we should have used music more to bridge certain narrative jumps. Dreams are set down in words, when they're often better represented with image and sound."

Another decision that Barry regrets was adhering to an industry standard. Without that standard, the film would have come in at sixty to seventy minutes. It might have had similar pacing, but it definitely would have been shorter." I mention to Barry that *Death Bed*, unlike most other horror films, has an almost gentle rhythm. "I think you're right. If I had thought about that at the time, I could have probably said to myself, 'What are we doing?' We need slow walks down long dark corridors, things jumping out at you, shocks, more spooky stuff. While I was never overly fond of those slow walks, dark corridors, things jumping out at you, I do think shocks and spooky. I can be quite fun. I guess I didn't have them enough in mind, or it wasn't in my right mind. I don't know."

The sound was transferred and mixed at Patrick Thomas's studio in Toronto, while film processing, the negative cut and the answer print were done in Detroit, by which time the film had cost approximately \$30,000. With just a few remaining jobs to be done including the addition of credits to the beginning and end, the film was virtually finished. All that remained was to find a buyer.

"We like to think we cheat less."

Unfortunately, Barry's problems were just beginning. "In 1977, just after the 35mm answer print was finally done, we had a screening in Toronto for the Canadian contingent crew. A Canadian film distributor was at the screening. He offered me a distribution agreement for Canada, which I signed. Since he had only a small company, he couldn't afford to blow up *Death Bed* to 35mm, but now, he told me, I could go to a Toronto lab and they would blow up the movie on the basis of a 16mm print, secured by this contract. So off I go to the lab and to the film lab. Now, I'm not saying the distributor was a crook, in fact he was very polite and competent, but his Canadian film distribution agreement as if it were used toilet paper."

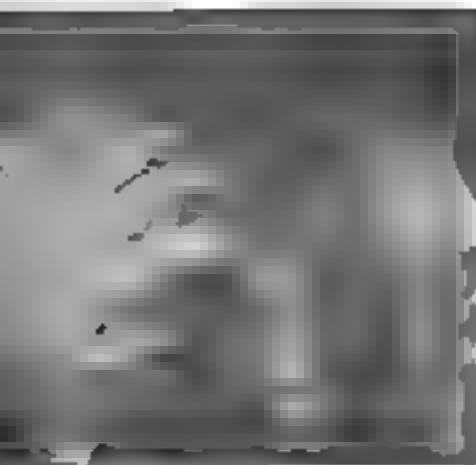
The Canadian deal didn't come off, though, due to the letter to the USA. Over the next couple of years, Barry traveled to Los Angeles and New York City several times making the rounds of the small film distributors. "Mostly, I didn't like the movie or didn't think they could make any money with it," he recalls. "The late seventies were tough times for some of these operations. The drive-ins and urban action houses were closing, along with the theaters that some distributors had been using to show their releases." Those that did show interest were often hit by the blow-up costs. The tenor of these meetings

could be gauged by the attitude of one sales manager for L.A. distributors Boxoffice International, who took a fancy to the movie. Barry recalls, "I was in L.A. in 1977/78 screening *Death Bed* on the cheap off a flatbed. Steve Kaplan came over from Boxoffice International, saw the film and expressed interest. His sales pitch was, 'Don't worry about us cheating you because we're going to. But we like to think we cheat less.' A clever line and Steve was never laid. Harry Novak was out of the country at the time, his brother would have to approve a deal. I showed the film to him in a proper screening room and he simply

was interested. Steve then said, 'Don't worry about it, you wouldn't have stolen much anyway. We like to think we cheat less, but we cheat just as much as everybody else.' I saw Steve three or four more times over the course of the next year or so. I believe he had burnt his bridges with Roger Corman at New World, and Atlas Films, and he would go on to burn his bridges with Boxoffice International in a big way. Steve maintained healthy relationships with a number of sub-distributors, often at the expense of the companies he worked for. I remember him expressing pride in his TV ad campaign for *Rattlers*. Dark screen with just the title, *Rattlers*, the narration something like, 'This is a scary movie. In fact, extreme, we are not ALLOWED to show you any scenes on television. Actually the movie was so tame, Steve told me that he couldn't find anything in the film to use in the ad. Steve's way of saying goodbye to Boxoffice International was to give the actual grosses of *Rattlers* to its producers. But the mistake they made, at least in Steve's mind, was to sue Boxoffice International, not the Novaks personally. That's when Boxoffice closed and resurfaced, I think, as Vuhant International. So the *Rattlers* producers may have ended up with an empty judgment against a defunct company. I called up Boxoffice around that time."

A call from New York raised Harry's hopes for a while, someone had seen *Death Bed* and was ready to pay money up front. "I fly to New York, there's a meeting. I didn't know the film would have to be blown up. He'd seen a 16mm print, but assumed the film had been shot on 35mm. He said I had a distribution agreement, I didn't sign it. I found out he would have signed over the contract to another company. That way he would have had to pay out only a percentage of a percentage. This happened, in one form or another, a few times. The whole affair was becoming extremely dispiriting. As Barry dryly summarizes: "The Nos were Nos, the Maybes were Nos, and the Yeses were Nos."

But Harry was determined not to be steamrollered by despair into accepting a crummy deal. "To answer the obvious question, 'After a while, why didn't I just sign anything to get the film into release?' I was looking for a distributor who would blow up *Death Bed* and who would pay me something if the film made money. I was being totally naive; I never expected to receive whatever producer's share was in the distribution agreement. But I wanted to get something. So I found myself not following up deals or signing agreements where I truly felt there would never be any return. After hawk-ing the movie for two or three years, my only choice seemed to be, sign the film away and expect nothing in return, not even a halfway decent release print. Even though most of the money in the film was my own, there was still some outside investment in the movie, and people had worked on spec. I was reluctant to sign a worthless contract. I know that's a contradiction: people receive the same from an unreleased film as they do from a film in release with a worthless distribution agreement: nothing. But still, in the early eighties I talked to a few people about a video release. The last person I remember speaking with was Martin Murgu, aka Johnny Legend. We never met. I think we had a couple of phone conversations. He seemed like a nice enough fellow, and at this point all I wanted was for him to put in enough money for *Death Bed* to have a decent video release print. However, he was strapped for



...es with the anti-

cash, since he had just produced *My Breakfast with Blonstein* (1983). After that, I pretty much forgot about the movie.”

And so there the entire ten-year struggle ended, with an unreleasable film and \$30,000 down the drain. A gloomy end for a project steeped in dreams – except, it wasn’t the end at all. They say truth is stranger than fiction: in this case, truth took the cliché as a challenge.

The Mouse of Destiny

A lot of things have changed since that day, sometime in the early 1980s, when Barry consigned his print of *Death Bed* to the attic – not least the presence of the internet, our lives. As a research tool the internet is invaluable: a book like this would have taken fifteen years, not five, to complete, and without it, George Barry would never have realised that a pirate release of his movie had attracted devotees abroad. I began researching this book in January 2001 – and at the top of my wish-list of directors was George. As luck would have it, in September that year a film fan called Daniel Craddock posted an appreciative review of *Death Bed* on his website *Lightsfade*, which is where the various threads of this story come together at last.

That anyone should even have heard of *Death Bed* – much less seen it and bought it on video, came as a great surprise to Barry himself. With *Death Bed* rejected at every turn, he’d been discouraged from continuing as a filmmaker. “There were a number of projects I tried to get off the ground,” he says, “but I was never able to secure enough money to do them on other than a piecemeal basis the same way *Death Bed* was done. I didn’t have the energy, confidence or resolve to continue on that road. If I’m honest, it was really a lack of courage to undergo a similar pounding.”

No wonder. One night, though, in September 2001 after working late compiling a database for his book-selling business, Barry decided to unwind by browsing the internet for information on a famous movie actress he’d seen on TV that evening. Google queries led him to the website *Movie Database*. Scanning the topics under discussion, he clicked on a post by the French film journalist Jean-Claude Michel, who was asking for information about a very strange, very obscure movie. The title? *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats*.

Barry was astonished: not only was a pirated version of his movie out there in the world, but it was exciting connoisseurs of the *cine-fantastique*. Michel’s query included a link to Daniel Craddock’s online review. Craddock too was asking readers if they knew anything about the film. Barry wrote to him, and soon an interview was posted to accompany the review.

When I began work on this book a Google search for information about *Death Bed* turned up nothing. Fortunately, my good friend Marc Morris, of the website *Mundo Erotico*, knew of my eagerness to interview Barry, and a year later, in January 2002, he too tried a search. The timing was perfect. Marc found the *Lightsfade* link and within days Daniel Craddock put me in touch with Barry.

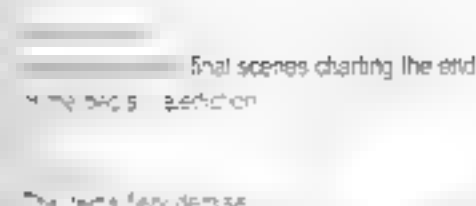
I was overjoyed, and it wasn’t long before the notion of a DVD release for *Death Bed* came to mind. Early in 2002 I’d been approached by Nico B. of Cult Epics DVD to write liner notes for his release of Agustín Vidaranga’s *Tras el cristal*, so, when a mooted DVD release of *Death Bed* by *Lightsfade* fell through, I sent Nico a video copy to

see what he thought. He loved it, and *Death Bed* received, at long last, its debut release in America. There was even a world theatrical premiere, at the San Francisco Independent Film Festival, or Indiefest, on 15 February 2003 – a little late, perhaps, some twenty-six years after the film’s completion. But unlike *Rip Van Winkle*, *Death Bed* awoke into a new world that had still not quite caught up with it.

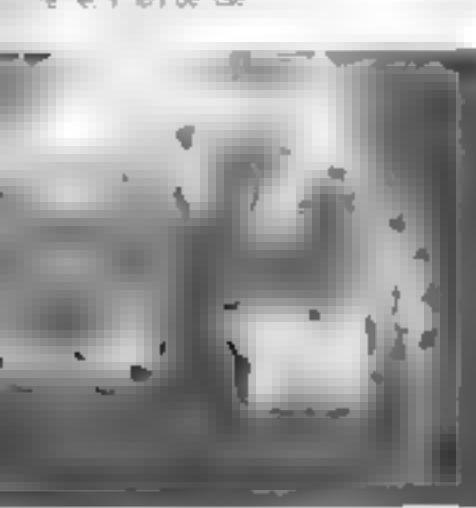
Who’s Been Sleeping in My Bed? the Fairy Tale Life of a Cult Classic

Now the facts and names and dates have been marshalled for this least documented of silver-screen dreams, there are still questions to be asked regarding its unique provenance. Barry’s thoughts on his creative process give some insight into this most dissonant of horror films: “Horror and fantasy films have been my favourite type of movies since I was a child. But I believe a horror film can be more comforting than a fairy tale. Fairy tales possess an unrelenting logic similar to dreams, they can be frightening, and inevitable. As a kid and through my early teens, I enjoyed reading science fantasy and horror literature. I read a fair amount of spooky stories, English and American. Poe, of course. H.P. Lovecraft, many others. I was too old to be reading fairy tales when I was a young teenager, but I started college at sixteen and soon I wasn’t too old any more to be reading fairy tales again. I loved Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales, and that led me to read *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Years later this may have led to my interest in myth and folklore. Why did I use Beardsley in *Death Bed*? Hmmmm. I think, early in the writing, I decided the bed was never going to talk, and I needed a device to supply the film’s history. Why the picture, I don’t know. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? And if it’s a Wilde connection, that could lead to Beardsley. Did I come up with Beardsley because I thought Dave Marsh looked like Beardsley? I went to school with Dave. I know, at least in my company people were not stopping Dave in the street and asking ‘Are you Aubrey Beardsley, famous (and deceased) English artist?’ Maybe it was because of Maureen Petrucci, the girl I was going with at the time. I felt Maureen would be able to draw a decent Beardsley imitation. Maureen did most of the art and set design for the film and actually co-produced the movie while we were filming.”

Asked about his possible esoteric interests (after all, the period from which *Death Bed* draws was rife with the occult fascinations of Madame Blavatsky and the Temple of the Golden Dawn), Barry offers this response: “I don’t believe in the supernatural or the occult, but I believe they exist. I don’t believe God or the Devil exist outside our bodies, but they may exist inside. A person may have faith there is a God/Devil, they don’t need science for proof. A person may have faith there is no God/Devil, they don’t need science either. I’ve had people tell me true ghost tales. Some I thought were BS-ing me. At least one took at her word. What about ghost stories and horror movies? Some may be creepy and unnerving, but many are soothing and reassuring. They relate troublesome and fearful things inside us, often using a greater restraint than are granted to us by fairy tales and our dreams.” The stakes that Christianity attributes to the occult leave Barry unimpressed, and he explains in terms that make you wish he would direct again, perhaps from the works of



Final scenes charting the end of the film's production



Wendham Lewis, or even Marlowe. "I'm inclined to find Faust stories a bit silly in their narcissism, the exaggerated value they attach to an individual's soul. The Devil wouldn't really have to make the effort to acquire souls one at a time. What he would need is a very large office with lots of staff. Three shifts of clerks going twenty-four hours a day to handle the workload. He wouldn't need to advertise, he could rely on word of mouth. He wouldn't need a prime location, people would come out of their way. The lines of applicants would wrap around blocks and city squares and perhaps the cities themselves. I see shorter versions of these scenes every day. The purchase prices could be very modest. If the Devil needed the one-on-one contact of this process, he could spend even less since so many of us feel so alone. People would give up or offer their souls for nothing, they would be grateful for the attention."

And dreams? The 'dreamlike' analogy is positively invited for a film about a bed that kills its occupants, not to mention the presence of a shuddersome sequence where a dreamer is invited to eat bugs from a silver platter, or sees the pages of a book turn into mirrors that capture the flames of the fireman's axe. If the whole film feels like a dream, these dreams inside dreams are perfect analogies for our own night-time wanderings, cliché or not. "Life is but a dream" is still one of the metaphysical front-runners when it comes to a view of existence. Barry sees the dream angle in an active light: as a warning not to let go of life.

People not only forget their dreams, they often forget *about* their dreams. They forget about the process of dreaming: not only the details, but the event itself. If the journey is more important than the destination, then dreams are constantly changing journeys whose destinations we might not want to reach anyway. Some people use dream books with numbers, and others analyse their dreams according to physiological discipines, and that's okay, I guess. Better that, than turning your back on yourself and disregarding them altogether. *Death Bed* is not the only instance where I've used a dream. I've had for story.

Well, I wish, in *Death Bed*, I'd incorporated the dream elements into the story structure in a less simplistic manner. *Death Bed* came from a dream and, to begin with, I wrote the story as more of a fairy tale than a horror film. We filmed the story as more horror film than fairy tale, then in the editing process, *Death Bed* tried to return to its fairy tale origins. However hazy my thinking might have been, I planned *Death Bed* to be a genre film, an exploitation movie, a fairy tale in the context of a horror film with some considerations haphazardly thrown in."

As a long-time devotee of European horror cinema, I suggest to Barry that there's a very European feel to some of his imagery, especially the story behind the creation of the bed, and the demon who turns into a breeze. These are not typical drive-in movie notions. Says Barry: "The European look to the film has been mentioned to me before. This was not a preconceived notion. When we viewed the rushes of the first interiors, I can remember feeling they were too bright. Robert Fresco and I talked it over and I remember him feeling the same way. Then I believe Jack Brandis, the ga.ller, told me Robert had a tendency to utilise whatever lights he had at his disposal. So Robert made adjustments and we returned some of the lighting equipment to the rental house. This is a long way of saying the film became darker, even though we had to keep in mind the film was intended to be blown up to 35mm."

If I had to guess which horror fans might appreciate *Death Bed* most, I would hazard a guess at the European contingent, so I asked Barry if he's familiar with European horror cinema, citing a handful of the major players. "Of the directors you mentioned, I've seen Mario Bava's work the most. I certainly appreciate why he's been so influential. Could he be, in the West, the most influential genre director/cinematographer of the sixties? Or is that an overstatement? I quite like Michele Soavi's work. In fact his *Dellamorte Dellamore*, and del Toro's *Cronos*, are probably my two favourite horror films of the nineties."

Unlike some, Barry is comfortable discussing possible influences. "Films that deeply affect you may not be well remembered. But I remember, when I was seven or eight years old, seeing *Rodan* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the version photographed by Michel Kelber. I was fascinated, not only by the story of *Rodan*, but by the fact that the people in the film were all Japanese; and I was intrigued, not only by the story, but by the look, the colour of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Now neither of these I would list among my favourite movies, but what might they have started me dreaming about?" As a further guide to the mental world of *Death Bed*, he offers the following list of movies:

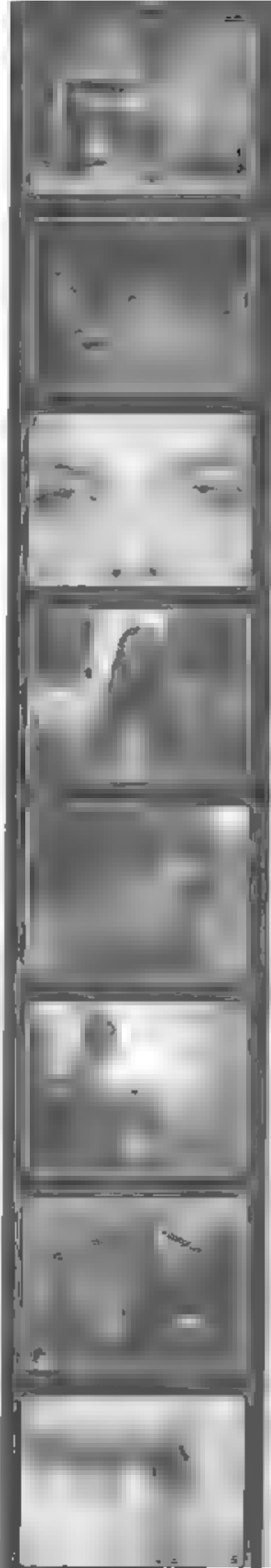
The Wizard of Oz
Lauren Kam
La grande bouffe
Persona
Easter Pussycat Kill Kill
Schrooge aka *A Christmas Carol* (1951 version)
Woman in the Dunes

"I really, really like these movies," he adds, "but I don't know how influential they were on me. I would have seen *La grande bouffe* after the core of *Death Bed* was shot. It may have influenced me during post-production. It certainly is one of my favourite films. Overall, I may like *Laurel* as well as my filmmaker." I mention that Cocteau springs to mind when I think of *Death Bed*. "Well, there is that magical bed in *La belle et la bête* isn't there? And may very well have seen the film before the making of *Death Bed*, though if I had, there wasn't a conscious connection."

Rediscovery

*I drink tea from the cup of my memory
 Strong & bitter. It is my heart's blood & reason.
 To say everything has its fixed place - its season
 Denies refuge in the shadows.
 Always now just becoming my past*
 L. George Barry

George Barry is in his fifties now, with two children, & thriving on the book-selling business, and for which we must be thankful, an attentive cardiologist. "I'm about to enter hospital for a successful heart procedure. As those who own the DVD of *Death Bed* will already know from his brief but welcome video introduction, he is a warm, humorous, and unforgoingly modest man. During the long correspondence he and I have enjoyed these last few years, he has consistently discussed his movie with a dry wit and habitual self-effacement. This modesty, to a degree, characterises his response to its belated 'rediscovery' too.



Death Bed



but there's no doubt he's quietly over the moon, knowing here are people dotted all over the world who adore *Death Bed* and consider it something special. He's aware that for some people it's a film to laugh at, as well as laugh with – not everyone is under ideal, or forgiving of the low budget nature of the production. Nevertheless, the majority of those who've commented on the film since its arrival on DVD have done so in a spirit of sometimes bemused, sometimes rapturous admiration. "I've received far more positive response to *Death Bed* than I could ever possibly have imagined years ago when we made the film," he told the editors of the book *Ghosts in Polyester*.¹⁶ Having watched the film emerge from the shadows, he says, "I can't think of any other movie that some people like the movie along the lines in which it was designed. Twenty-five years ago at the screenings – had for cast, crew, friends, family and guests, people laughed and told me they liked the movie. But that's what you would expect. The screenings attempting to secure distribution were, for the most part, pretty dismal." Barry is candid – he, even he, loved to know that audiences were, when confronted by the film's weirdness. "While it's not a comedy, it had for me to imagine a person laughing, or even being interested in *Death Bed*, if they didn't find some parts of it amusing."

It's a far cry from the disappointment of the 1980s. From the mid-eighties to when I found out about the film's pirated release, I didn't think about *Death Bed* a lot," he says. A natural memory? "No, more a thing you're forgetting." During the film's long post-production there were plenty of occasions where I felt like chucking the project, but even though the film was never blown up for theatrical release when I did think back about it, I found myself feeling... when I finished. Despite a striking lack of commercial work seen through to the end can offer a certain sense of inner satisfaction. However, despite the fact that *Death Bed* has found a small, appreciative, if possibly demented, audience is a great bonus, a gift really. For me, to be honest with you, if I had looked into a crystal ball before shooting the movie and had seen *Death Bed*, would take five years to complete and then not receive a theatrical release. I would have rewritten the story and attempted a more conventional, commercially acceptable movie. Whether it would have worked or not, I don't know. If I had looked into the same crystal ball after shooting the movie, I might have adopted a what-the-hell attitude and Ron and I would have edited the film a bit differently. It's funny how I found out twenty years ago about the *Death Bed* pirate, along with some modest positive feedback, that might have been enough of a boost to see me through to something else. I never stopped writing, though my output, which was never voluminous, did increase.

Epilogue

So with a symmetry as poetic as the film itself, *Death Bed*, a film of fairytale imaginings, enjoys a fairytale happy ending and a wonderful new beginning, emerging on DVD to many a rapturous and admiring review. George Barry is at last taken its place as one of the strongest treasures of American horror. For sure, its new audience is modest in size, but I know people who adore *Death Bed*, who will probably watch it ten or fifteen times again as the years go by. And I'll be one of them, because even after talking at great length to his most genial and

candid of directors, even after viewing the film through the lens of new facts and background stories, *Death Bed* retains a mystery, etched into the grain like a magic spell ensuring that it will always feel like cinema from a parallel universe. It's a movie where dreams and nightmares are intertextually bizarre, where humour, horror and surreal imagination are tucked up together so tightly they've merged into a single unique night-beast. There's nothing else out there you love it there is nowhere else to turn back to the bed.

¹⁶ This pirate copy was then purchased by a Spanish collector, which is the only known copy.

¹⁷ "Little Tiny" can be seen in person in *The Heist* (dir. Robert Greenwald, 1997), a man who is a fan of the film.

¹⁸ Born in Brittany in the late 17th century, Pierre Abbe was a Jesuit philosopher of Arminian bent, who brought disbelieving ecclesiastical teachings of the day and thus set a new standard for the church. He was married to a woman with a remote student, Heloise. He was attracted by a young woman's uncle, after which his teachings took on a more devotional tone.

¹⁹ Director of *Carnival of Souls* and *Wings of the White Horse*.

²⁰ The story is at www.peanutshellier.org.

²¹ *Remontberg in Chronology*, ed. Chris Rodley, Faber.

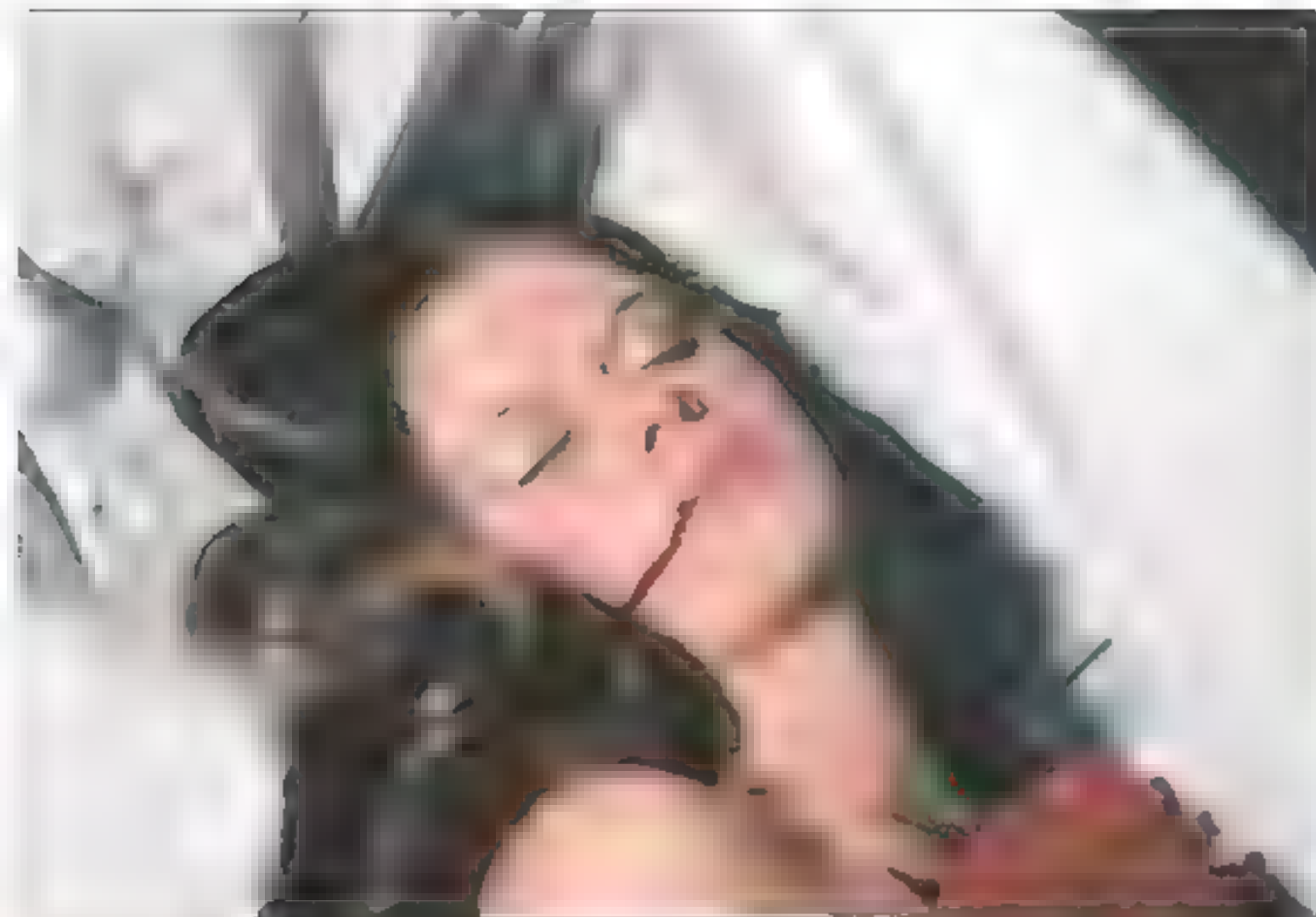
²² It was a very good idea to have a book about the film, and I was very happy to see the DVD release of *Death Bed*, and to my own to the beginning and end credits. George suggested from *Lunar: Darkness*, the first album by my group, was about adapting it to match the mood of the film and phases seen in the album version, leading to the book.

²³ Box-Office International closed down in 1978, and V International appeared the following year. "May I talk to St. Ann's inquired. Kaplan is no longer with us. ST. AM. It's all over." The book is a collection of letters and notes.

²⁴ *Notre Dame de Paris* (1954) dir. Jean Delannoy.

²⁵ See www.ghosts.org.

| GEORGE BARRY FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1980 (Produced) | ADAMS ON (SHORT FILM) WITH J. BARRY |
| 1980 (Produced) | DEATH BED (SHORT FILM) WITH J. BARRY |
| 1980 (Produced) | DEATH BED (SHORT FILM) WITH J. BARRY |
| 1980 (Produced) | DEATH BED (SHORT FILM) WITH J. BARRY |
| 1980 (Produced) | DEATH BED (SHORT FILM) WITH J. BARRY |



above: mixed art by Asylum of Souls
William Miller

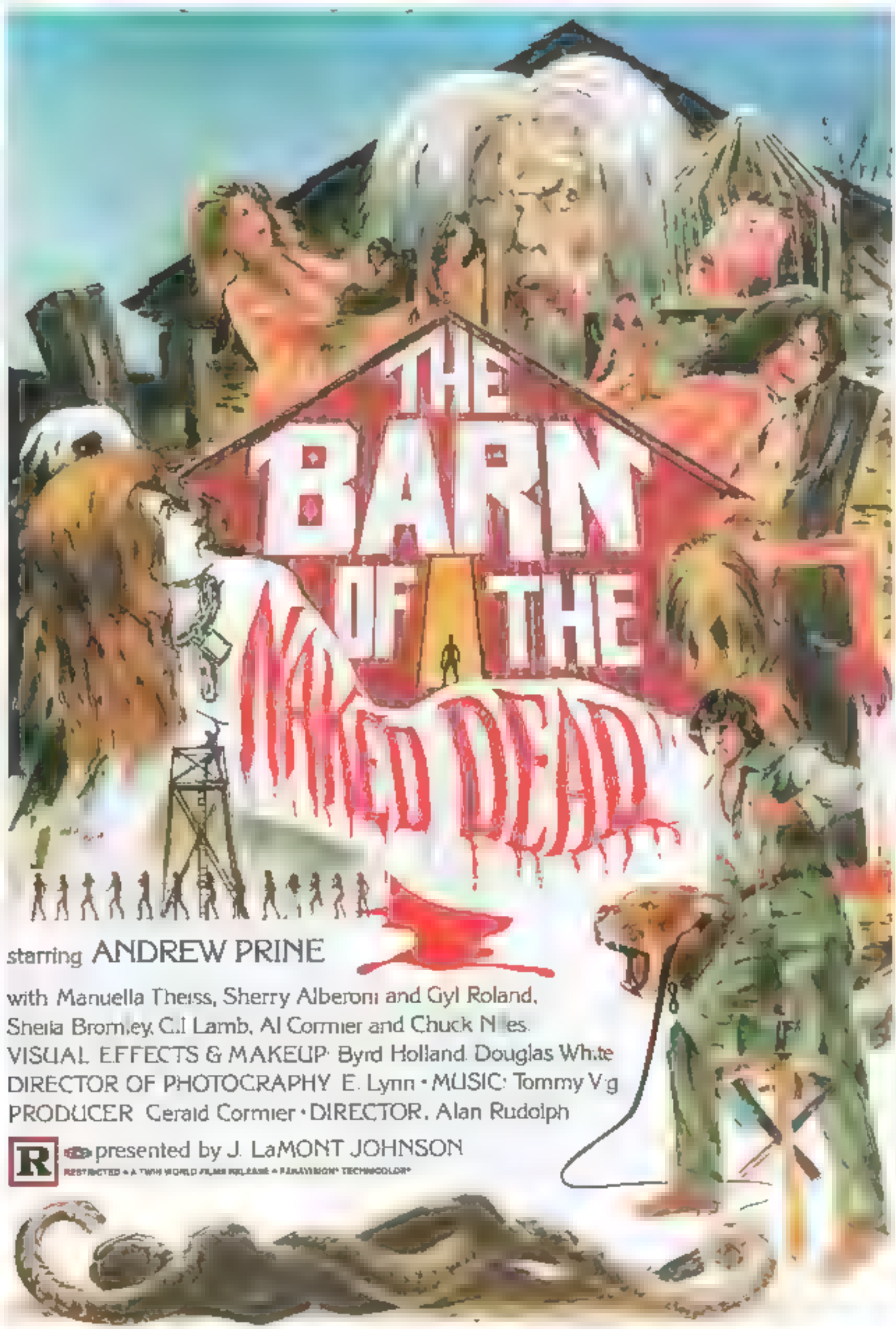
left: A Gothic Horror
Barry's Death Bed: The Bed That Was
1977

below: Sliver of a
Band's The Alchemist





Right of the Cheapshot Monsters
main feature Don Donle's **The Alien Factor** (97) is a low-budget monster short-story. Here's a
a feature too long-legged to fit on this page—ages and gentlemen
insert for Rare Australian video artwork for Midge Stanley's **Attack of the Beast Creatures** (95)
shown above. Strong art for the mind-bendingly bad shot-on-video horror epic **Black Devil Doll** from Me

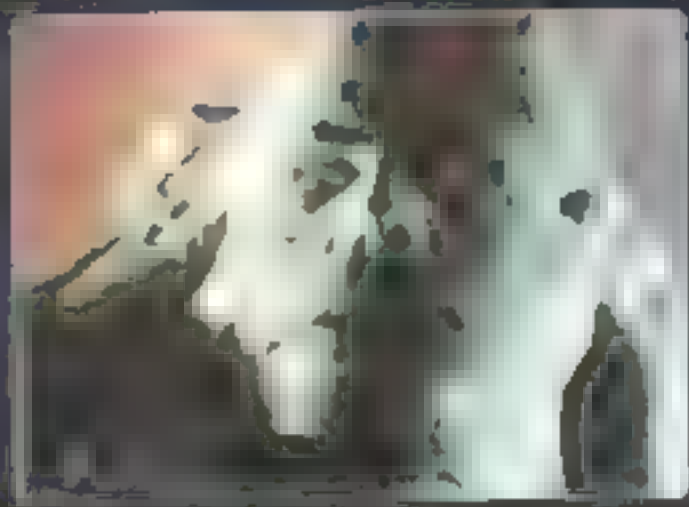


THE BARN OF THE NAKED DEAD

starring **ANDREW PRINE**

with Manuella Theiss, Sherry Alberoni and Gyl Roland,
Sheila Bromley, C.J. Lamb, Al Cormier and Chuck Niles.
VISUAL EFFECTS & MAKEUP: Byrd Holland, Douglas White
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: E. Lynn • MUSIC: Tommy V. G.
PRODUCER: Gerald Cormier • DIRECTOR: Alan Rudolph

R presented by J. LaMONT JOHNSON
RESTRICTED • A TWIN WORLD FILMS RELEASE • PANAVISION® TECHNICOLOR®



THE TENANT IN ROOM 7 IS VERY SMALL,
VERY TWISTED AND VERY MAD!

BACK TO



This page: Movies from **Basket Case**
Jeff Bridges in Muller "Diana Br...
...n't nail all...ness... and...
...can Henshaw... "I...anger...
...feeding... me...Bel...gets even...
...Bel...in a...very bad mood...
...above...Ev...than...UK...video...
...N...the...and...Street...marque...
...H...brocks...let's...Scare...Jessica...To...Dest...
...let...The...h...ing...d...m...of...
...B...the...who......angry...in...

opposite page: More about
a genuine American lifestyle. The flag
and the Vikings. p. 112
guy-chap: page

THE UNBELIEVABLE EROTIC ADVENTURE!

THE BEAST

In Exciting
Primal
COLOR

AND

THE VIKENS

*A Pleasure Weekend
Turned Bloodcurdling
NIGHTMARE!*

BEAUTIFUL MAIDENS
PREY OF A CRAZED
HUMANOID PRIMATE

Fantastic Escapism
into the
JUNGLE EXPERIENCE!

ADULTS ONLY

STARRING: JEAN DUBOIS, KIM DORRIS, MARTIN MARMAN and BOB ABRAHAM

Produced by: RAY NADAU & AL FIELDS Directed by: RAY NADAU

Distributed by SOPHISTICATED FILMS, INC.



DREAM OF BLOOD



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1999
by
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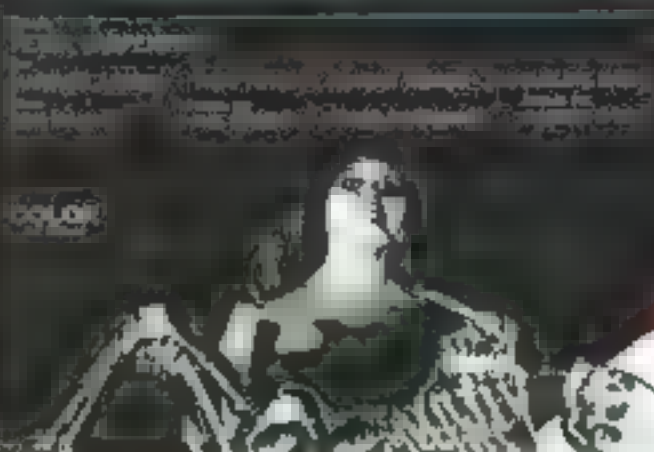


Sometimes
Death is
The Easy
Way Out

THE BRIDE WORE BLOOD



GRITE El terror podría ahogarlo si se queda en su garganta.



MANIA DE SANGRE

un extraño placer



this page

above Spanish director
O'Neill's Blood Mania

far left British director
Wisconsin's smaller town
The Demons of Ludlow

left 5 video in the series
1975 psycho-thriller: Criminally insane

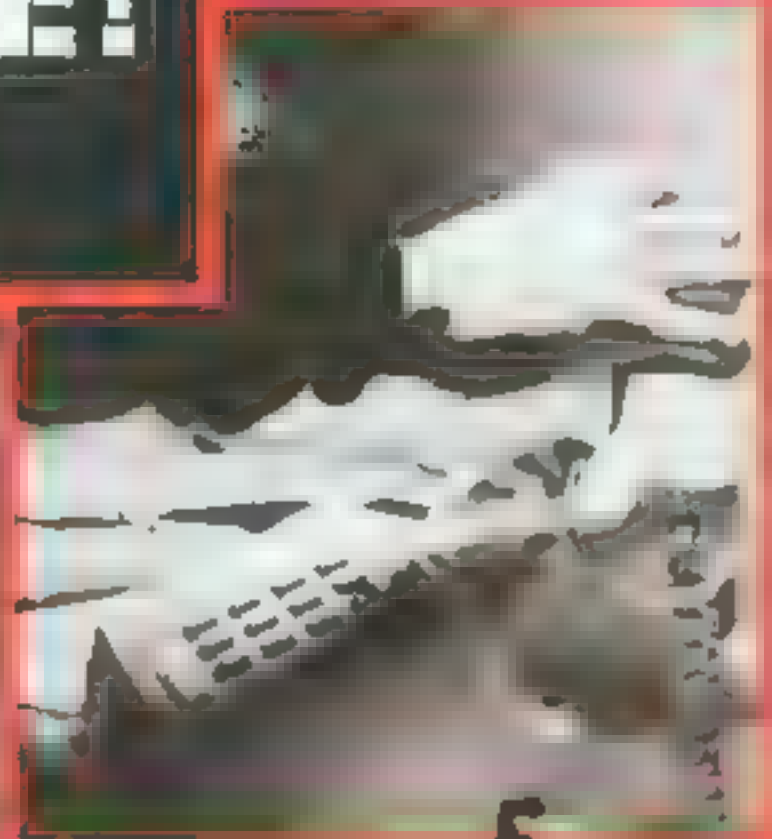
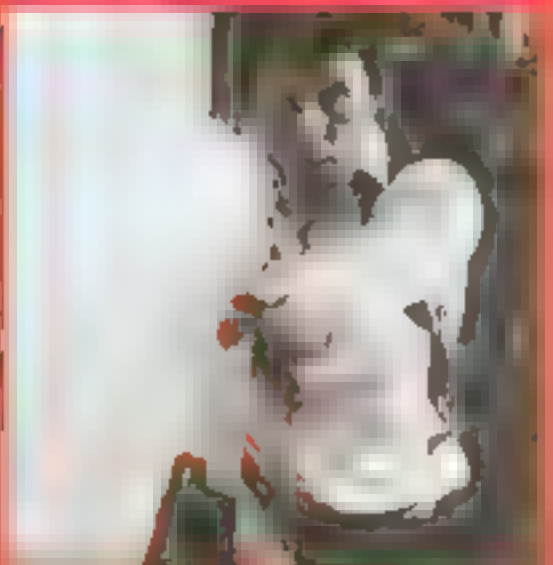
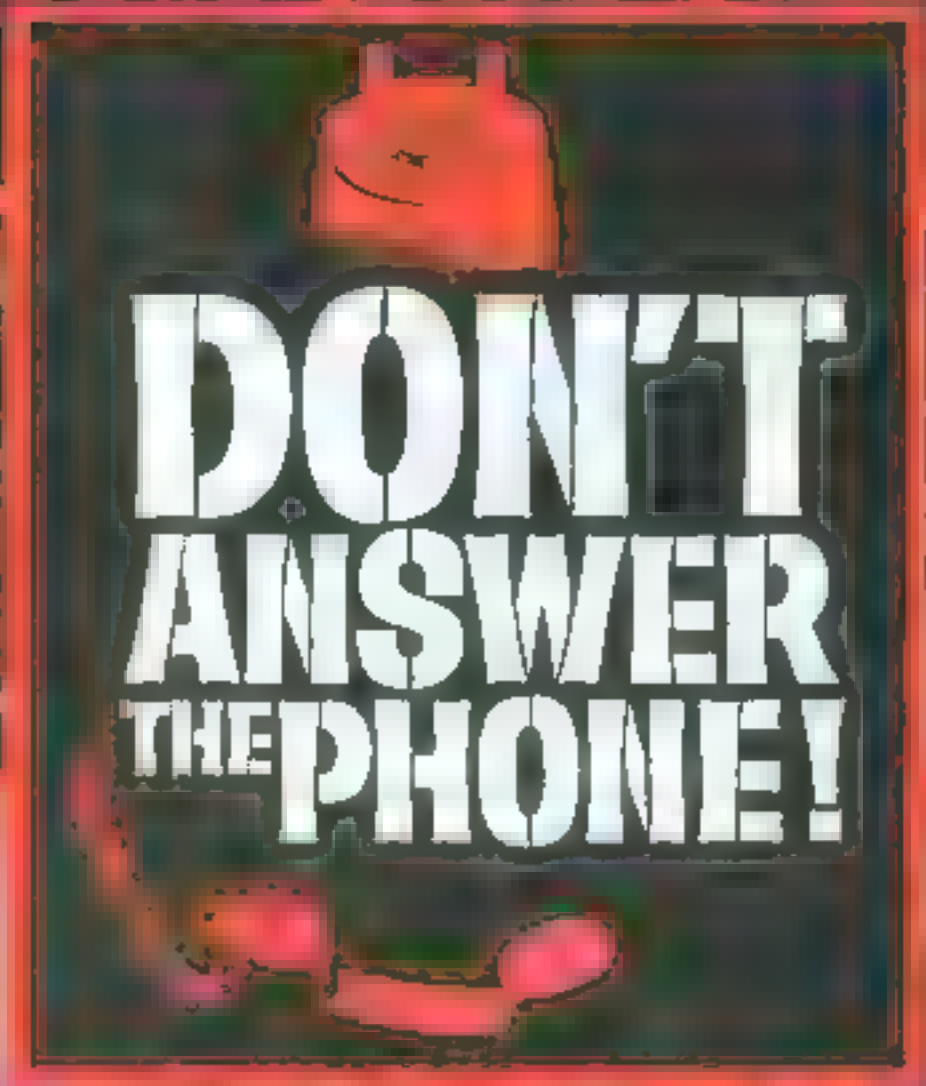
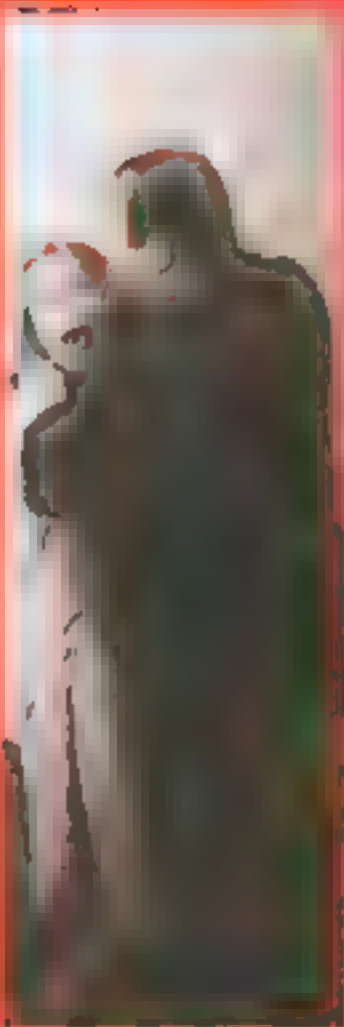
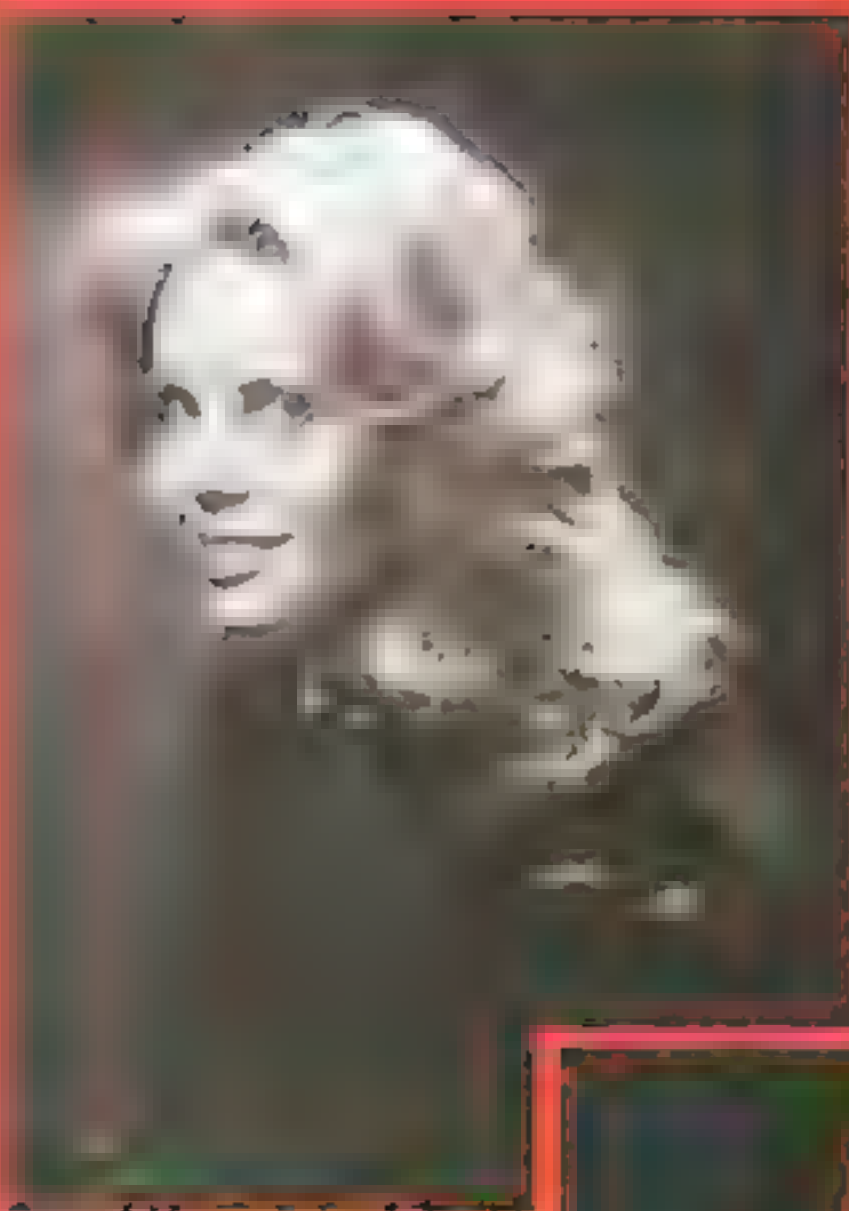
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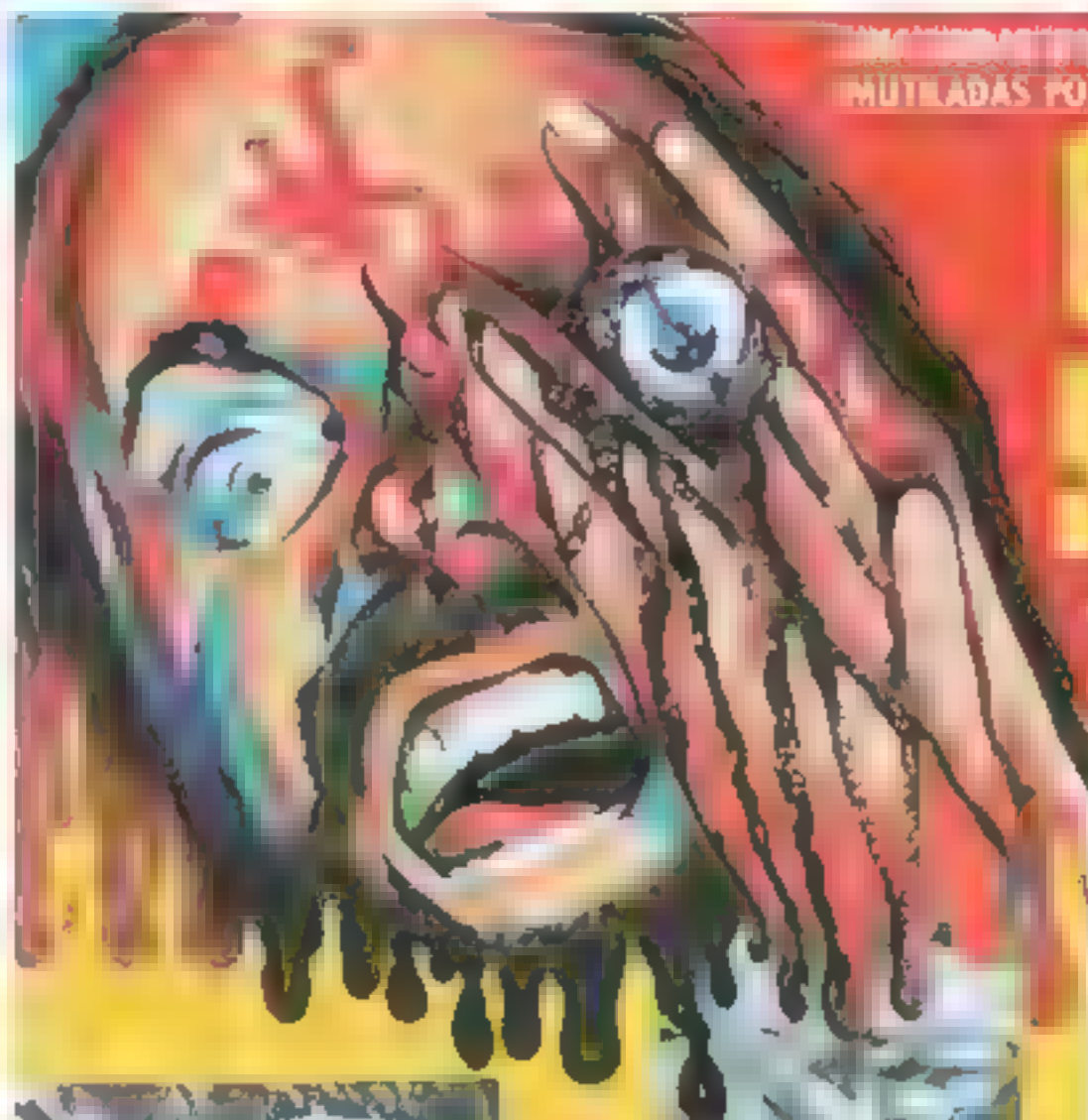
Ludicrous over-acting in
O'Neill's Blood Mania

Video art for A. Adams'
Brain of Blood

A bloody moment from
Crazed '97

video art to Bush's
die The Brides Were Blood

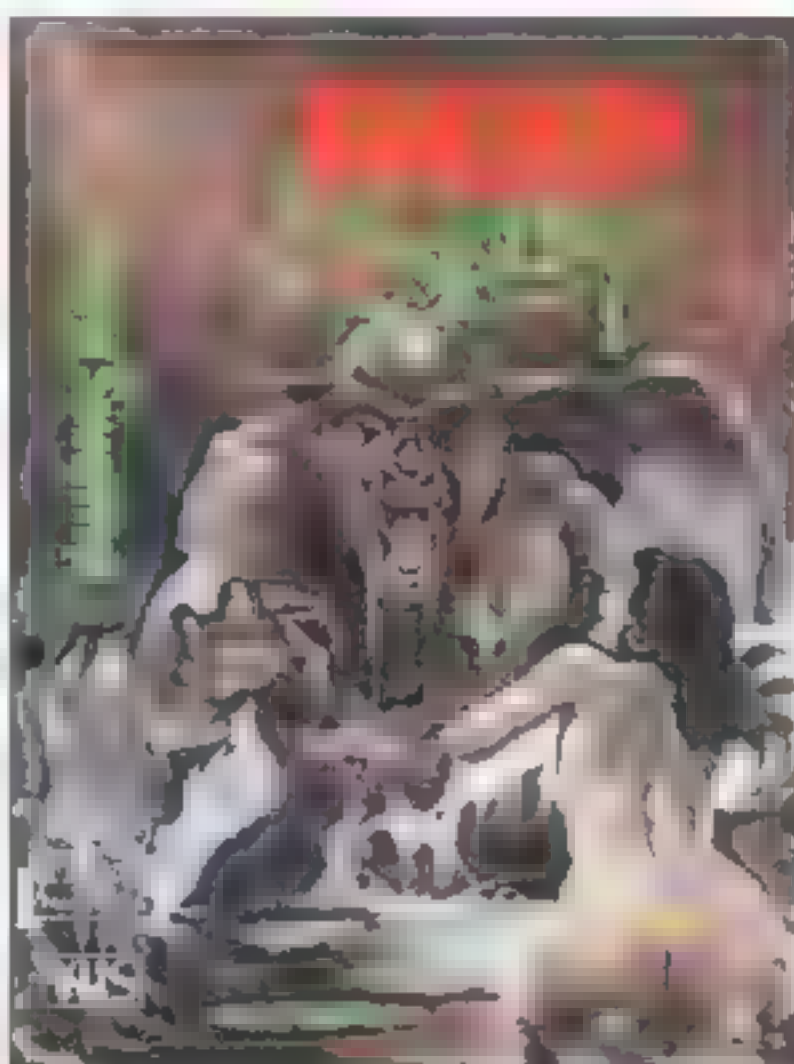
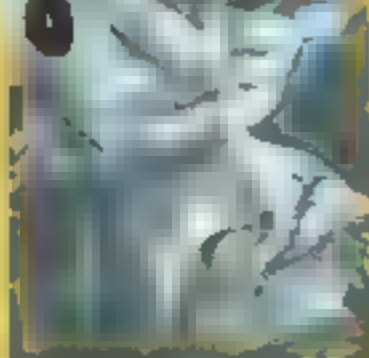




MUTRADAS POR UN ASESINO TRASTORNADO

LIBERTAD SIN OJOS

LOS SANGRIENTOS COLORES



free page

above

A Spanish film

The Headless Eyes

greatest horror flicks

far left

Japanese 'horror' film

Trap

known as The Texas Chain Saw Massacre

left

Deep Swamp

William B. Davis

bathing in the messiah of the

of the world

non-sensical horror

obscure British

Tiger from Pinocchio

The Deadly Spawn

opposite page

A montage from the

psycho-fest Don't Answer the Phone

the killer

about 100,000



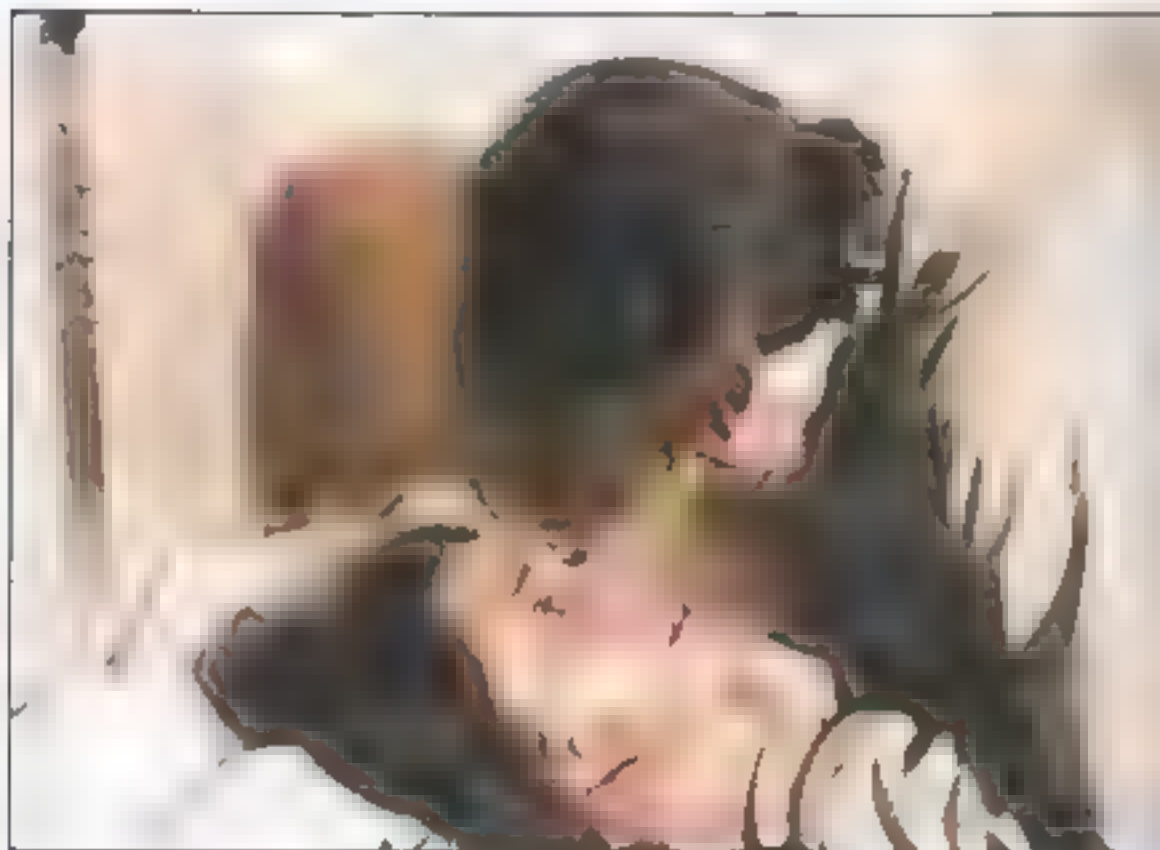
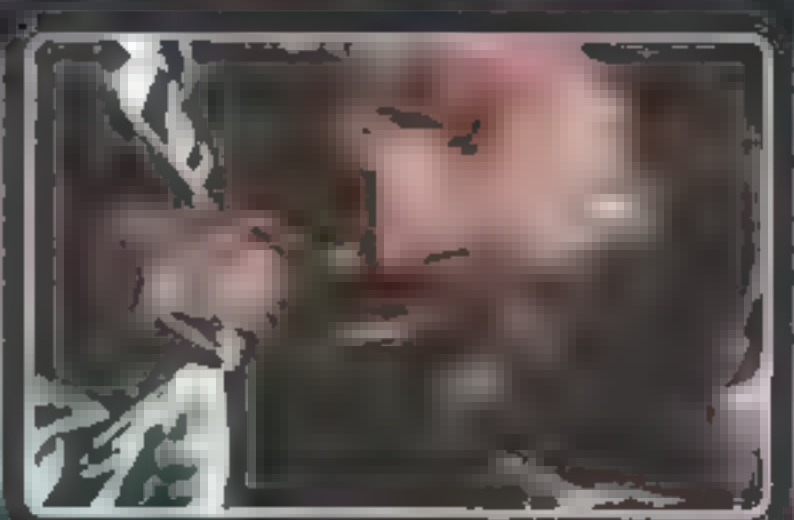
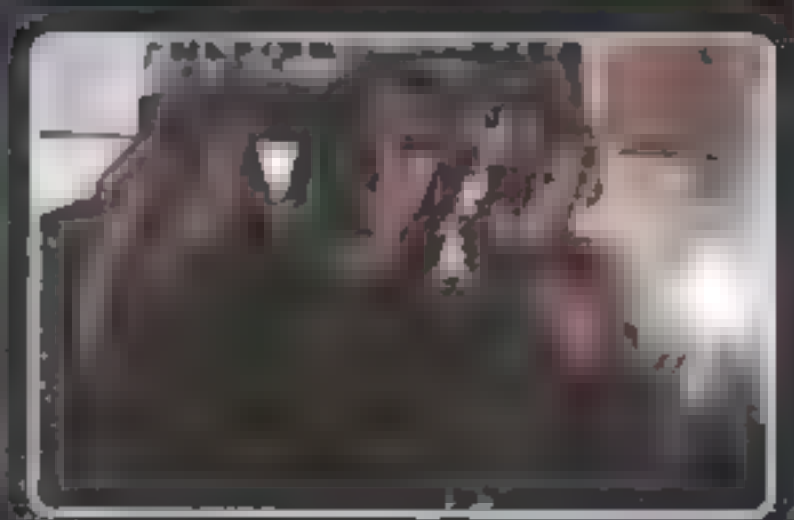
Something Old, Something New,
Something Borrowed, Something Blue
Let's Scare Jessica To Death

Paramount Pictures Presents A Charles B. Moss Jr. Production

"Let's Scare Jessica To Death"

Starring Johra Luper, Burton Heyman, Kevin O'Connell, Graham Corbett, Alan Manson, and Marianne Costello
Written by Norman Jewiss and Ralph Rose Produced by Charles B. Moss, Jr. Directed by John Harkiss Color A Paramount Picture









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JOB [illegible]

slasher [illegible]

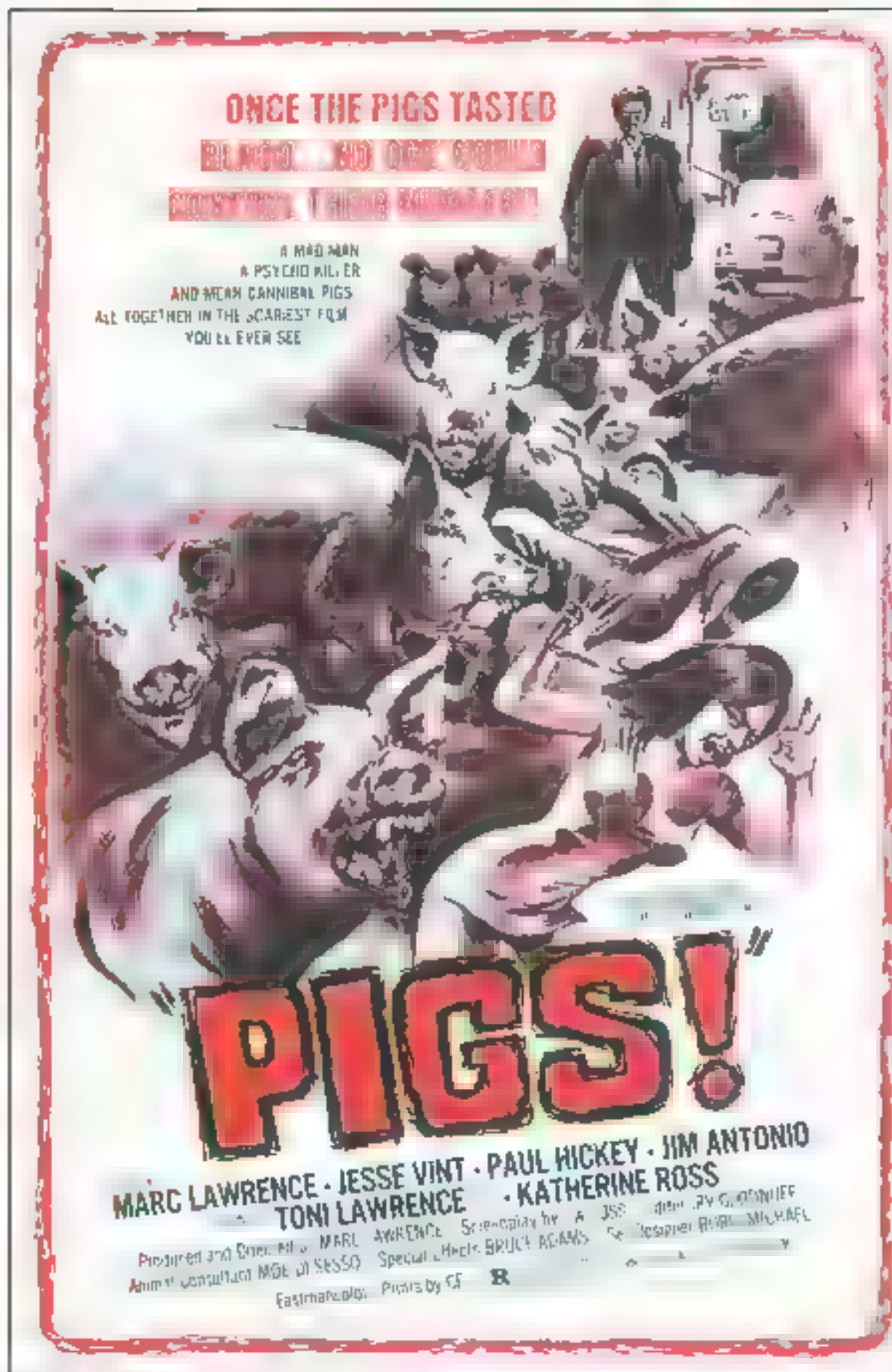
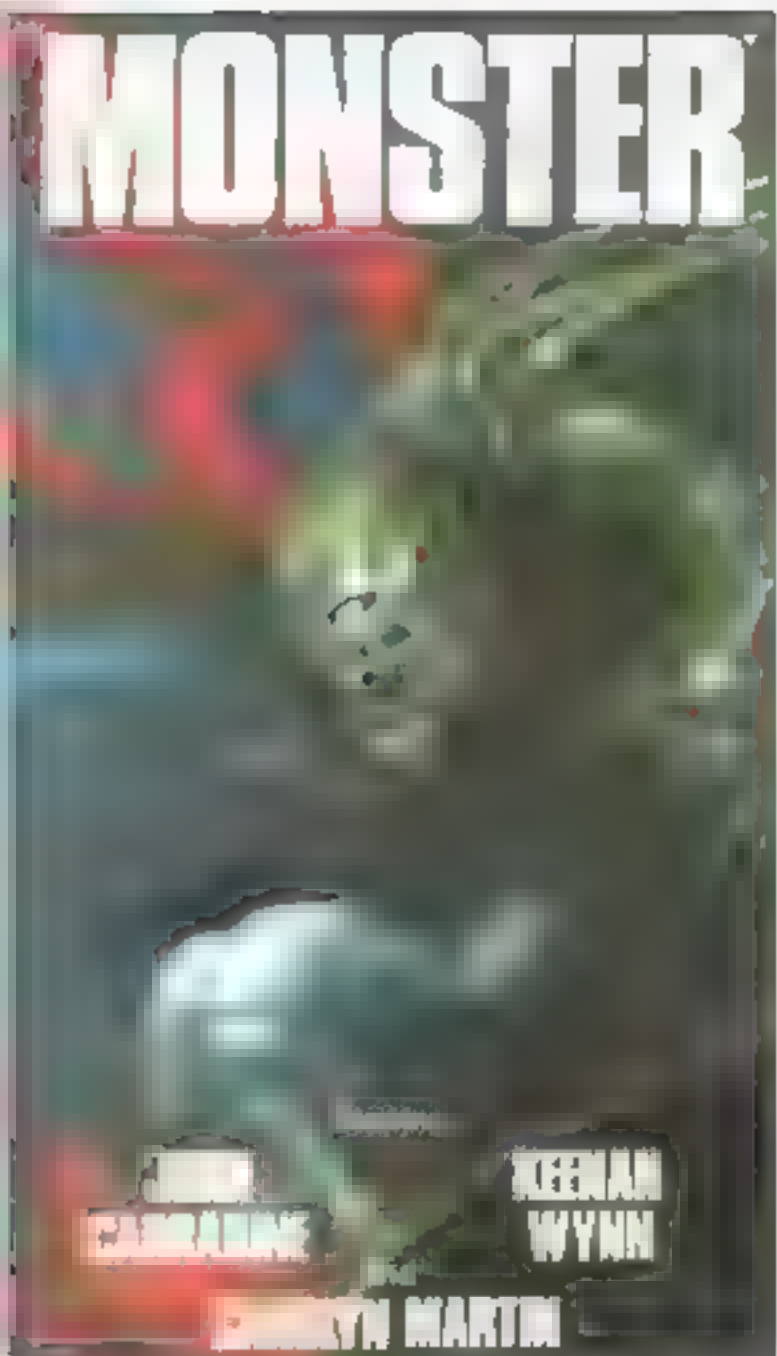
Maniac 405

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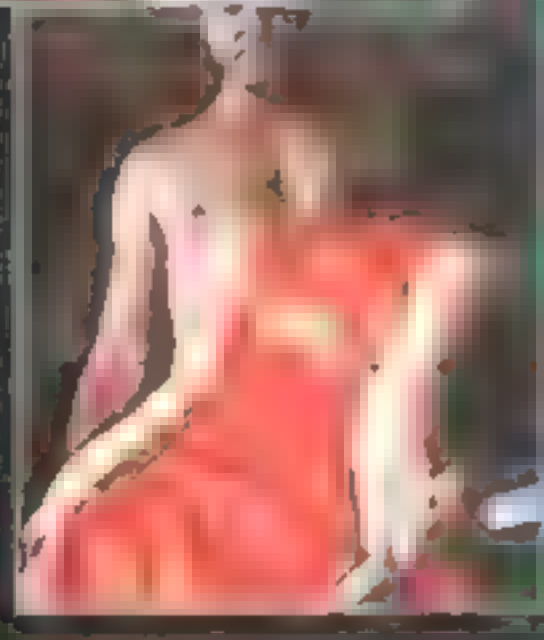
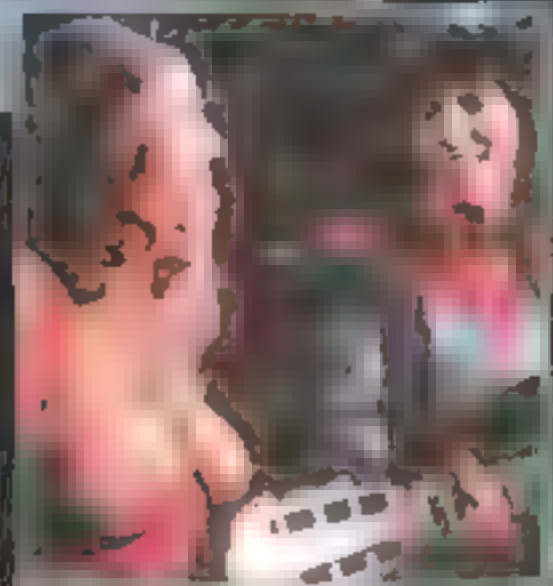
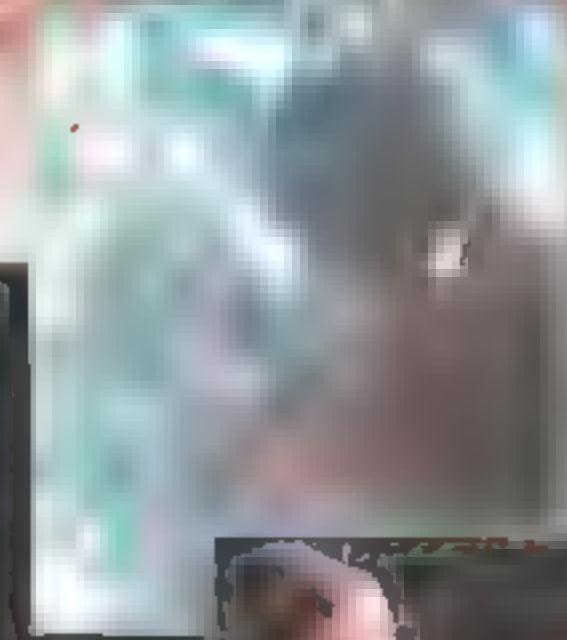
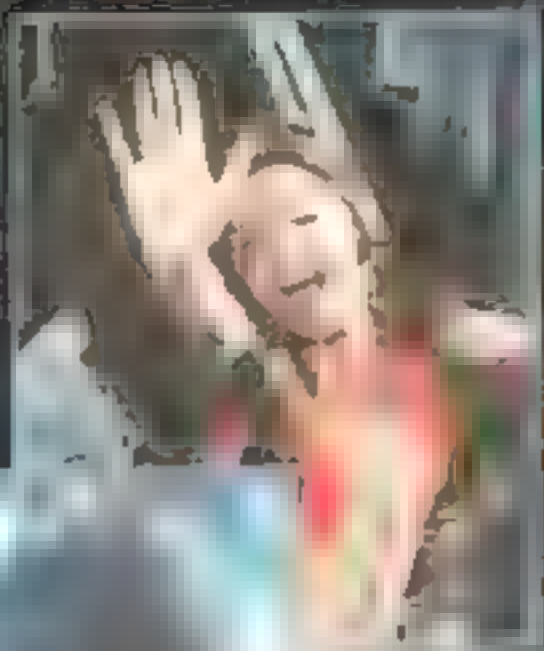
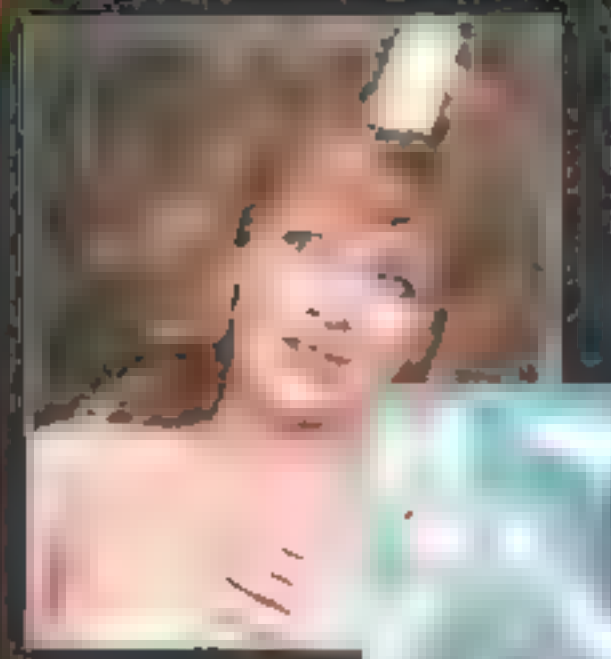
An [illegible]

speech [illegible] Maister's

Carnival of Blood



A NAME FOR



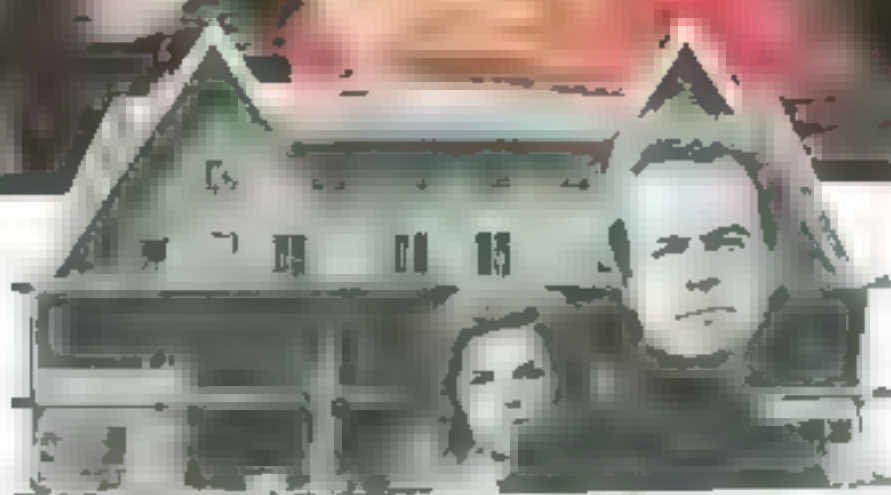
background picture: A Name for Evil's intriguing UK video artwork

top right: US one-sheet for Miro Lawrence's *Intimate Figs* (1972)
bottom row: Dan Dehler's *Night Beast* (1962) in all its facially alluring glory

Featured in
PEATHOUSE and PLAYBOY

The
dream
house
that
becomes
nightmare

WITNESS FOR EVIL



Presented by PEACHTREE PICTURES • Starring ROBERT CULP and SAMANTHA EGGAR
screenplay by BERNARD GIBARD • music by DOMINIC FRONTIERE • produced by RFF • Healed by

1. THE FBI IS REQUESTING INFORMATION FROM NEWARK AIRPORT RECORDS SECTION TO LOCATE RECORDS OF ALL AIR RECORDS

If this one
doesn't scare you...
You're Already Dead!

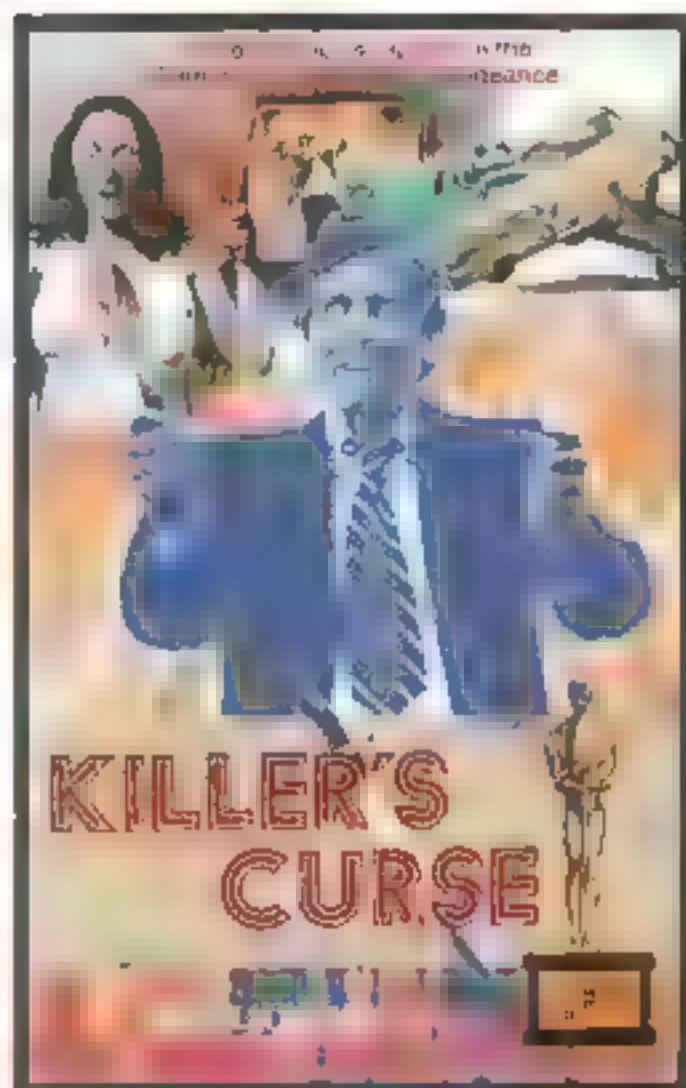
PHANTASM



MICHAEL BALDWIN
BILLY THORNBLAKE
REGGIE BANNISTER
KATHY LESTER

Produced by
DON COSCARALI
Directed by
DON COSCARALI
Written by
PAUL FETTERMAN
Music by
FRED MYTON
and
MALCOLM SEAGRAVE

Presented by
STUDIO CITY
FILMS



the page

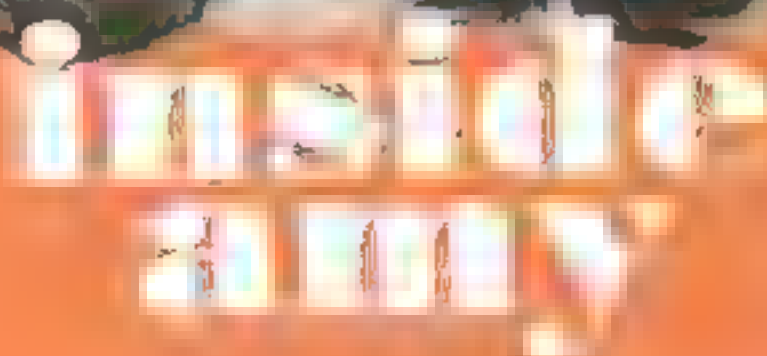
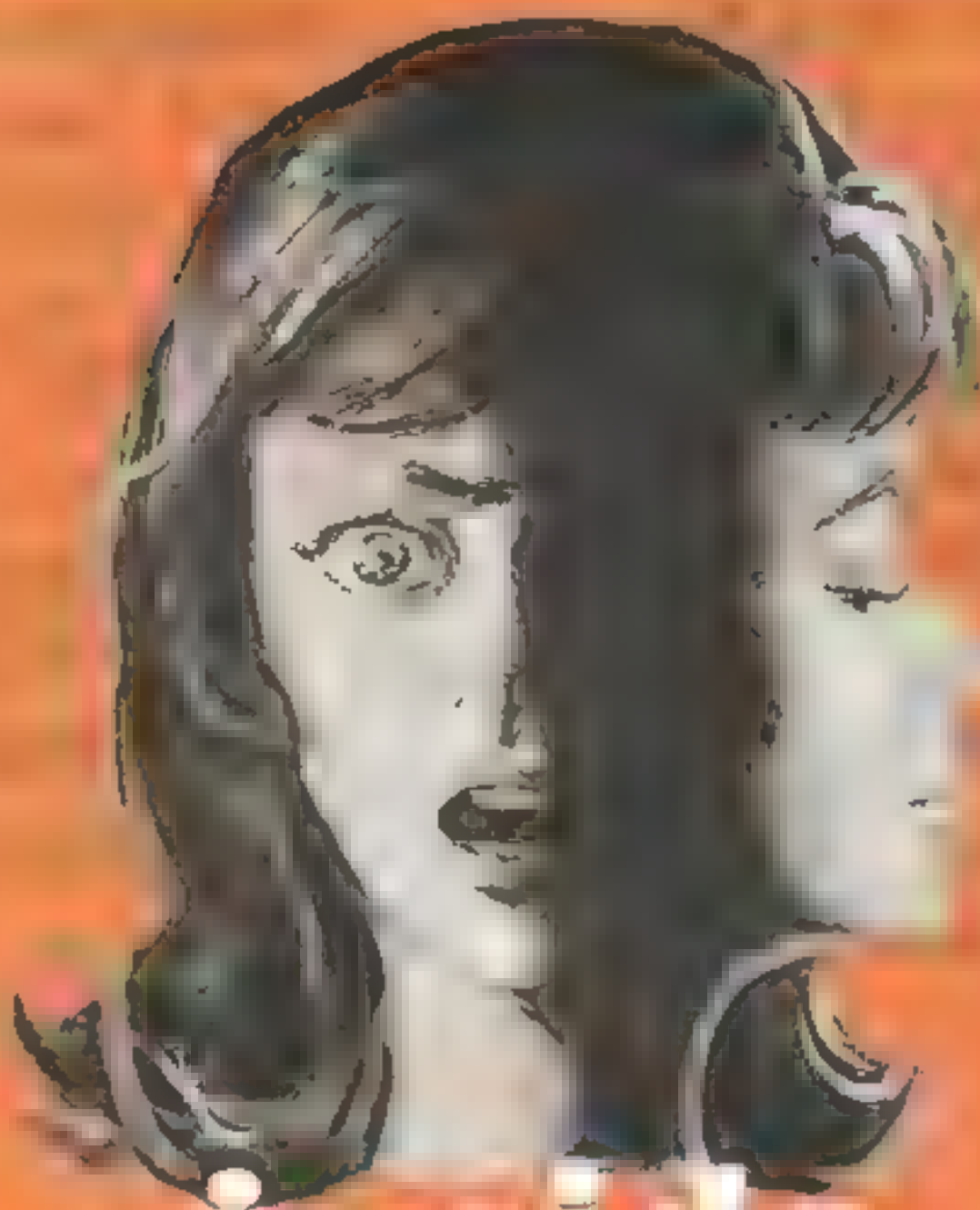
top: classic American and one
of the 3 us - the 1920s
magical Phantasm - 1928

and the lobby and for Phantasm
Australian - please like The Never Dead

left: Cleaver madness from A. A. - Nurse She
49 - the first - 1928 - 1928 - 1928 - 1928

opposite page
bottom: sheet for A Name for Evil - 1928

She played the Swingers Games—AND LOST!



INSIDE AMY Starring Eastman Price & Jan Mitchell as Amy
 Produced & Directed by Ron Garcia Written by Helene Arthur
 Music by Jack Preisner Exec Producer Dave Arthur
 Color by Pacific Film A DART Prod Released by ADPIX

R **RESTRICTED** Under 17 requires accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian

Video

Original conceived for the movie *Inside Amy* (1973), subsequently re-released as *Swingers' Massacre*. With the lead on the poster, saying "This is a Dart Production" — Dave Arthur was the original executive producer and his wife was the wife. Arthur also produced Dan Jones' *Superlative Abducted*, under the original title *Let's Play Head*.

Original

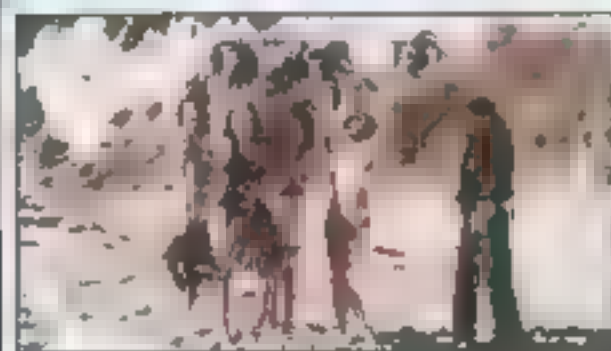
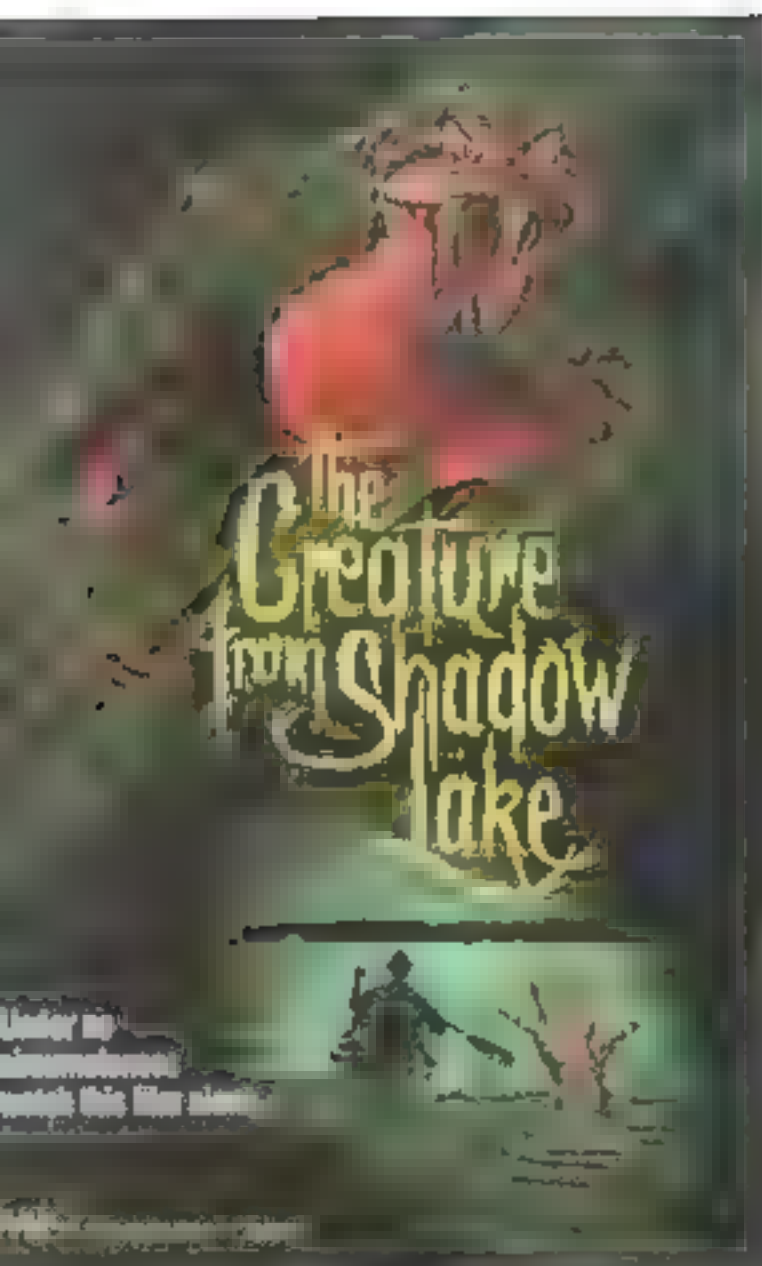
Re-release from the 1970s

1970 release for *The Swingers' Massacre* (1973), a millionth of the original. The original was *Let's Play Head*. Legend of *Swingers' Massacre*. Rare: *The Legend of Swingers' Massacre*.

The 1970 release for *Swingers' Massacre* (1973), a millionth of the original. The original was *Let's Play Head*. Legend of *Swingers' Massacre*. Rare: *The Legend of Swingers' Massacre*.

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THE DANCE

1981

James (Peter Sarsar) finds Death staring her
eyes at him in the shadows.
Bela Sarsar 1981

1977

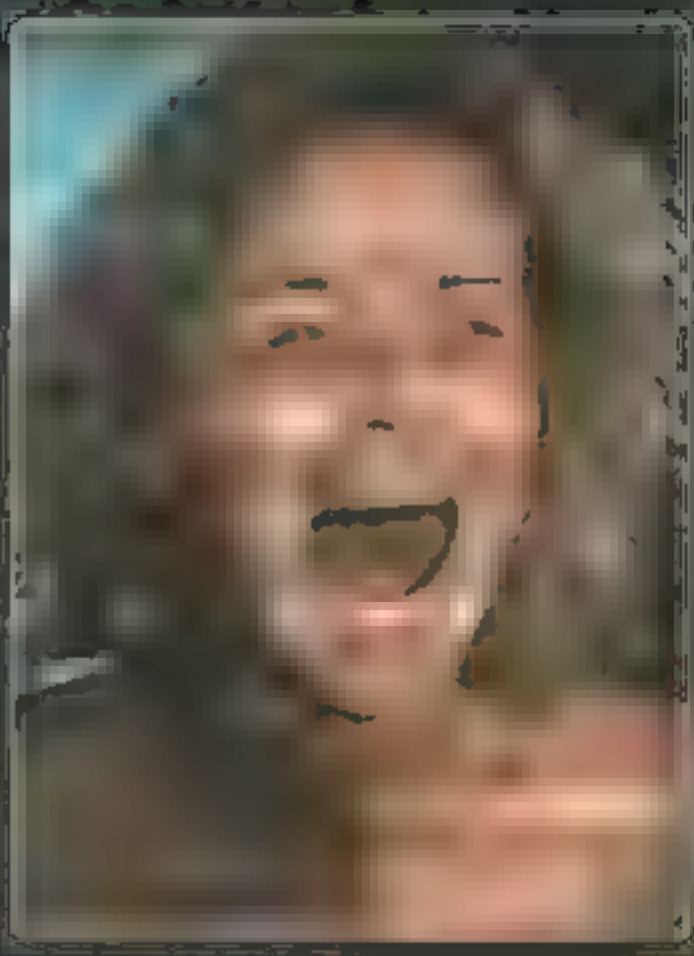
UK video art for Suicide Cult (1977), James
Sarsar's bizarre neo-physical thriller

1982

Choke, and background picture
are different pieces of British video art for
James Sarsar's collage movie 1982
The Scaremaker (1982)

1976

and last still - Sex Work (1976) takes horror
and fantasy part and mashes them together.
Summary of video-director Zebony Coll



Now from the Director of
THE EXTERMINATOR



**SUICIDE
CULT**
A MEGA FILMS VIDEO RELEASE

**THE
SCAREMAKER**



One by one he killed them until
he was trapped in his own game



**AWAKEN YOUR WILDEST FANTASIES—
ALL IT TAKES IS A CANE, A BRIEFCASE
AND A...**



WILKINS PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS

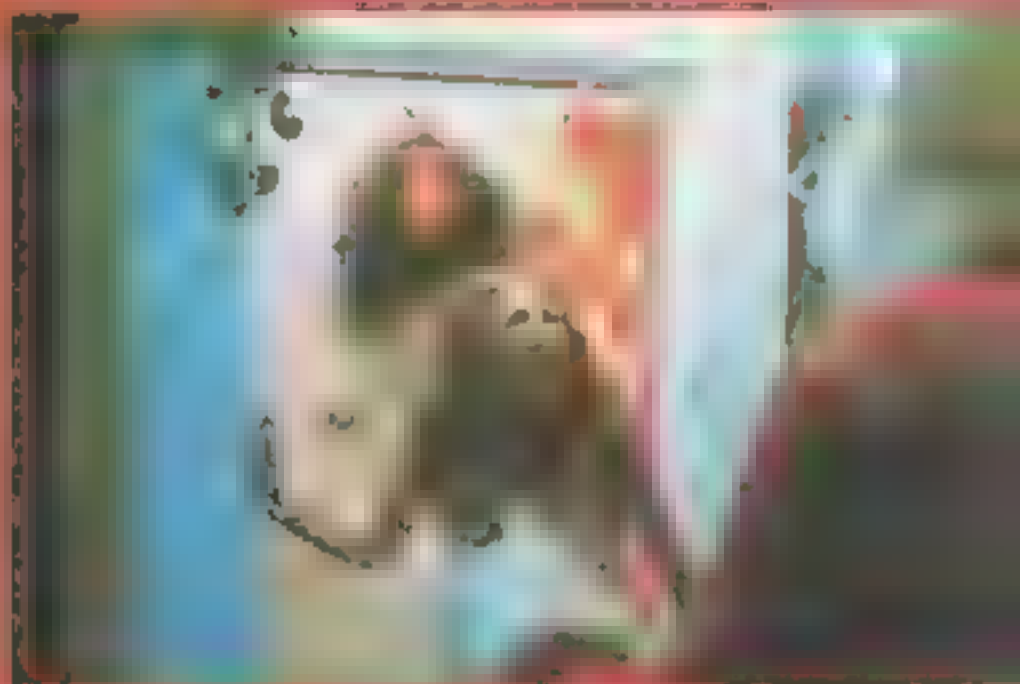
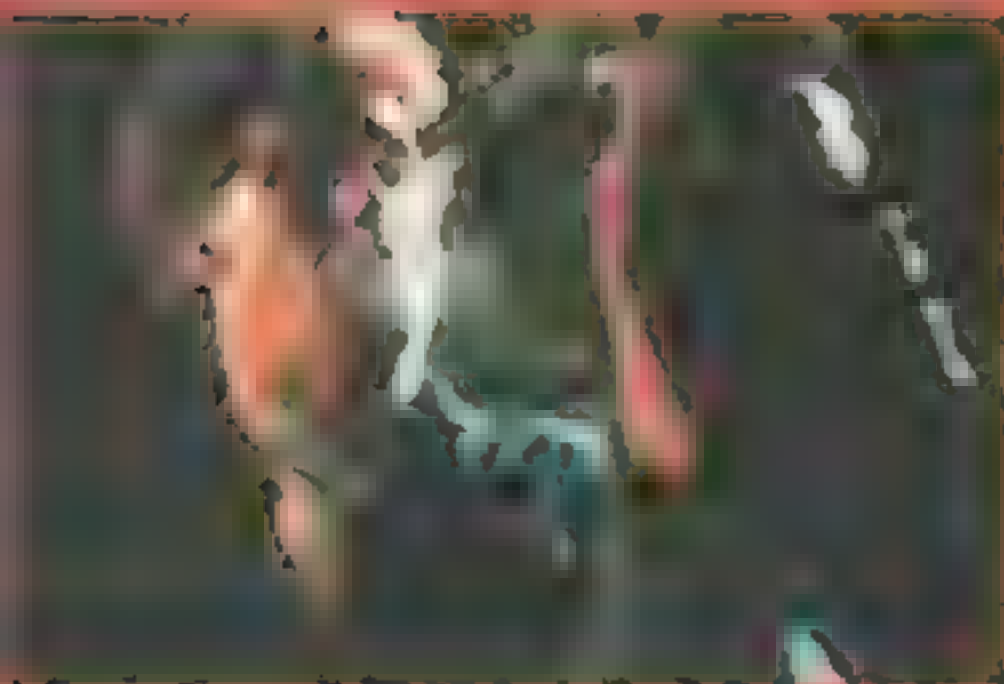
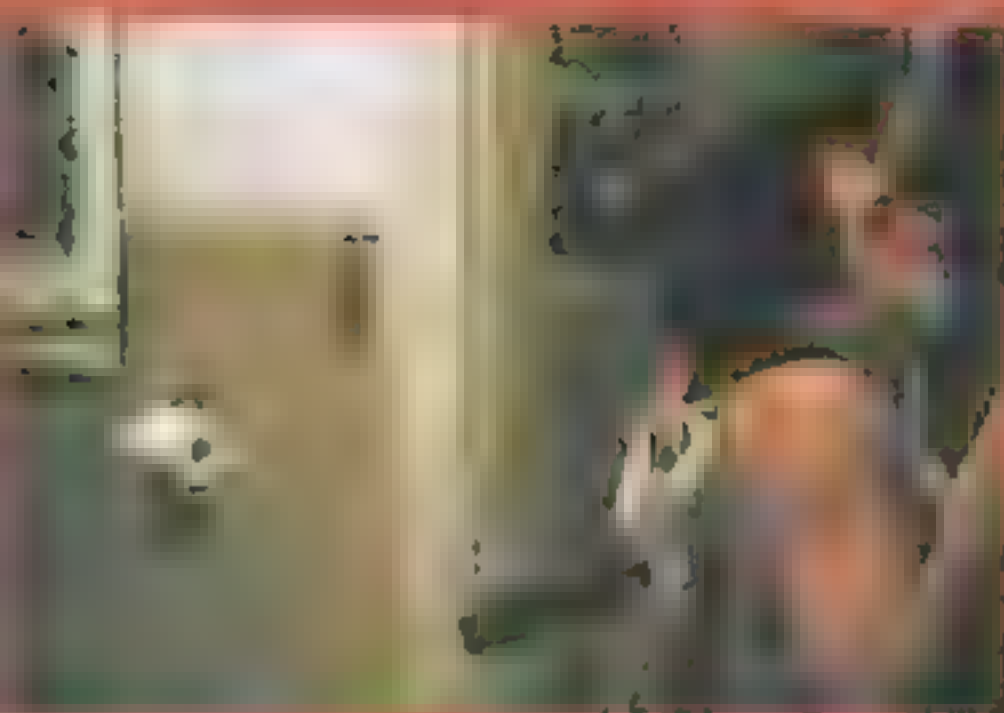
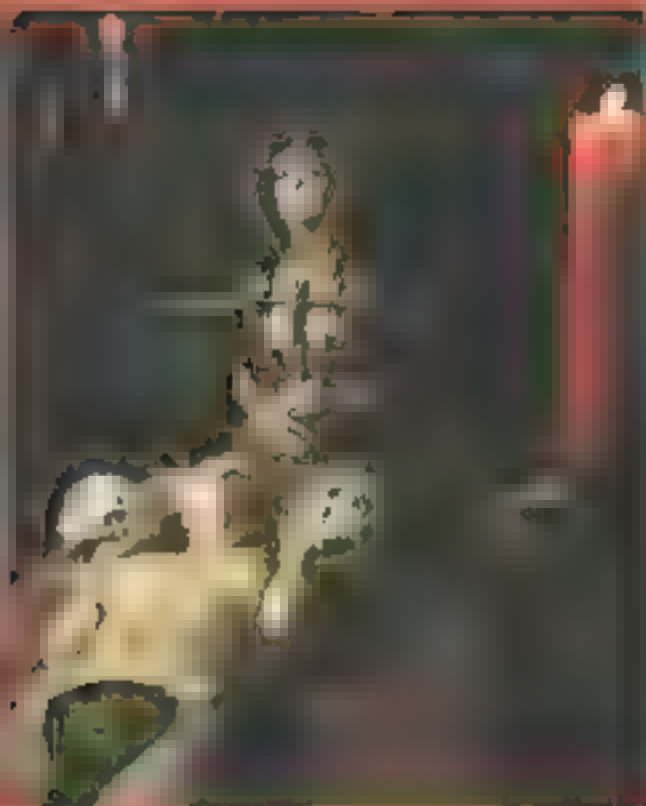
SEX WISH

YOU'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT!

HARRY REEMS · C.J. LAING · ZEBEDY COLT · TERRI HALL

With Dennea Benfante · Tony Rome · Candy Love · Joaquin la Habana

EASTMANCOLOR · FOR LADIES & GENTLEMEN OVER 21





What he does to your nerves
is almost as frightening as
what he does to his victims!

THE TOOLBOX MURDERS

CAMERON MITCHELL PAMELYN FERDIN and WESLEY E. JR.





M. P. A. R.
1985

A JAMMENCE APPELBAUM PRODUCTION THE ALCHEMIST STARRING ROBERT GINTY JENNIFER DEOLING
JOHN SANIBERFORD VIOLA KATE STIMPSON AND MUSIC BY ROBERT GLAUDINI AS MISTRIO
MUSIC COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY RICHARD H. BARD EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS GUY Y. YINF PRODUCED BY JAMMENCE APPELBAUM
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER HARVEY GENKINS SCREENPLAY BY ALAN J. ADLER DIRECTED BY JAMES AMANTE

R
RESTRICTED
Under 17 requires accompaniment
of an adult

Reviews

ABDUCTED

Don Jones (1973)

See interview with Don Jones, John Slagter and Gary Kent

Made in California.

ALABAMA'S GHOST

Ernie Pyle (1977)

See interview with Ernie Pyle and Gary Kent

Made in California.

THE ALCHEMIST

Charles Bana (begun by Craig Mitchell, 1981)

87) A woman in white (Anna, Lucinda Dooling), is led by dark forces to a moonlight rendezvous with Delgato (Robert Claudin), an alchemist who lusts for her body – and her soul. Anna's husband, Robert Gentry, follows her through tangled woodlands, attacking Delgato with a knife; he instead accidentally kills Anna. In fury, Delgato utters a curse, condemning the husband to walk the earth as an animal...

The 1950s, Lenora St. Clair (Dooling again) is heading for Charlotte, North Carolina when she experiences a vision of the woman in white. Shaken, she picks up a hitch hiker, Cam (John Sanderford), infuriating him with her offhand and defensive attitude. Occult powers emanating from an old woman, Esther McCallum (Viola Kaine Simpson), draw Lenora's car off the road and into the woods. The car crashes, and Cam tries in vain to persuade Lenora to walk back to the highway. Instead she heads off deeper into the trees. In a glade, they meet Aaron McCullum (Robert Gentry again), whom Lenora recognises from her vision. Aaron invites them back to his shack and introduces Esther, whom he reveals is in fact his daughter. Aaron has never aged since the spell was placed on him over a hundred years ago, although his daughter is now very old. Disturbed by Aaron's sinister stories, Cam drags Lenora from the house. Aaron convinces Esther to use his car. Esther has summoned demons to enact the shifting of the curse from her father, but at the cost of Lenora's soul.

The Alchemist would have been fine as the bottom end of a double bill, but alone it is not really strong enough. The plot is archaic, and the function of the demons in particular is never elaborated upon. Top-billed Robert Gentry looks uncomfortable, is not unwell. His everyman shuck worked just fine in James C. Beckenhaus's *The Exterminator*, where he played a normal Joe pushed to violent extremes – as a cursed 40-year-old yearning for his lost love, however he's out of his depth.

The Alchemist was copyrighted in 1981 but failed to secure a release until '84. Bana took over direction from Craig Mitchell, co-director of Jon Casarelli's early credits *In the Heart of the Forest* (1976). You can tell from the disjointed nature of the film that it was a troubled production, because inconsistencies abound. Esther's death occurs with no explanation or build-up, and when Lenora meets Aaron she says he's the man in her dream, despite having angrily asserted earlier that her visions weren't dreams at all. Also a problem are the tacky and charmless optical effects,

typical of the endless parade of fuzzy blue lights butting around low-budget productions in the wake of *Polytergeist* and *Clover Encounters*... The demons provide a couple of startling moments, but you can already see in their over-determined sculptural design the beginning of another trend that would sweep the horror genre in the eighties: the overuse of screaming monster masks. A cheap prosthetic belt, *Raniers*-style, turns a dummy of the alchemist into a ghastly, toothy, red-eyed, black-skinned, horned creature.

Scant use is made of the script's more interesting elements. Alchemy is a potentially fascinating source of imagery for the horror genre, sadly for all its incidental pleasures. *The Alchemist* is unable to perform a transmutation of its own. The theme is never expanded. Aaron tells Lenora and Cam that the real aim of alchemy is self-transformation, an assertion that should have been the key to the story's climax. However, instead of Delgato undergoing a dramatic change of form in the latter stages, he is simply stabbed and bisected in the magic gateway. It's a shame the character is wasted, because his feelings for Anna seem genuine: the curse he places on Aaron is born as much from anger for the loss of his love as the thwarting of his will, making him an adulterer and a sorcerer but something less than capital-letter Evil (it's all a bit *Butterfly Hengist* really). The effects of the curse are likewise thrown away: after an early scene (borrowed from *An American Werewolf in London*) in which Aaron hunts down a small deer and fiddles its entrails for a couple of seconds, we see no more of his lycanthropy. What's left is basically a rather cluttered variation on the old witch's curse routine. At least the woodland location work is atmospheric, and a scene in which Cam and Lenora are attacked in the woods by barely glimpsed

Stylish US one-sheet for *The Alchemist*.

Photo of Lenora St. Clair (Dooling again) in film, confronts demons on the poster video cover for *The Alchemist*.



NEW RELEASE

You saw him in "The Exterminator"
now ROBERT GINTY is in...THE ALCHEMIST



Imagine hell let loose on the world.
the alchemist

THE ALCHEMIST

demonic figures is eerily similar to Richard Blackburn's *Lenora*. Bearing in mind the lead character's name, Band may well have been influenced by the Blackburn film. Also interesting are a couple of scenes that pre-empt the imagery of Ridley Scott's *Legend* (1985). *Lenora* walks through a magic stone gateway in the trees into a fantastical version of the forest, with a deep red sky criss-crossed with lightning, resembles a cheap and cheerful version of the Scott epic, as does a beautiful image of dandelion seeds blowing through a woodland glade. To round off these allusions to greater works, the score by Richard Band (the director's brother) is a classy orchestral affair reminiscent of Pino Donaggio's work for Brian De Palma.

Charles Band, born 27 December 1951, is the son of filmmaker Alben Band. He directed his first movie in 1973, a sex satire called *Last Exorcism in Burbank* starring Michael Pataki. After several years as an independent producer (he handled Pataki's *Mansion of the Doomed* and David Semmoller's *Tourist Trap* amongst others), Band started an Italian-based production house, Empire Pictures. Empire collapsed due to international financing difficulties in 1980; undaunted, Band started Full Moon Pictures the following year. The company still thrives today. His drive and enthusiasm for independent commercial genre cinema parallels Roger Corman's New World studios, although it must be said that Band has discovered rather fewer great directors along the way.

Made in California

THE ALIEN DEAD

Fred Allen Ray (1980)

aka *Alien Dead*

aka *It Fell from the Sky*

Not as good as Tony Malanowski's *The Curse of the Screaming Dead* (1982), but better than Joel M. Rued's *Night of the Zombies* (1981), this early effort from one-man exploitation factory Fred Allen Ray is more to my taste than his later, campier films. *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*, for example, but even here you can tell that he's tempted to make a send-up. The script employs enough 'mostly lamp' ironies to tip you off that the writers know how schlocky it all is; although unless such nod-and-a-wink witicisms are funny, I actually prefer the straight-faced approach of Don Dohler. Still, *The Alien Dead* is kind of enjoyable in its cheesy hundred-dollar way: some of the zombies look pretty good, and once the cheap, unconvincing gore starts to flow it doesn't let up. If only the performers hadn't taken it upon themselves to mug for the camera so much, one fellow clearly pleased with himself for chewing raw liver on camera, and a 'Look at me!' in ker-razze! moment that belongs in the

blooper reel, not the movie. Venerable *Flash Gordon* star Buster Crabbe makes a game attempt to take things seriously, and no one makes fun of him, which helps, but no one is going to watch this for the acting. The gore scenes have that stazy feeling of everyone standing just-so in order to conceal wires and tubes. I particularly enjoyed the scene in which an old lady is stuck through with a pitch-fork, a laboriously mounted effects sequence giving us everything but the actual piercing. If you're a devotee of zombie cinema, you might gain a few crumbs of comfort here, but don't bother trying to make sense of the rationale for the zombie uprising—something to do with a meteorite killing all the alligators, I think. Just enjoy discovering this little known tribe of the cinema's ultimate rejects as they lurch out of the Florida swamps to join their brethren around the world.

Made in Florida

THE ALIEN FACTOR

Don Dohler (1977)

Made for beer and cigarettes in the backyards of Baltimore, *The Alien Factor* is, if nothing else, a testament to the persistence and ingenuity of its director, Don Dohler. As drama it's strictly flat-pack-furnishing, but as an effects piece it's surprisingly ambitious, with the balls to put its monsters up there on the screen in all their twenty-back glory and to hell with suspension of disbelief. Dohler, born in 1946, was a film fanatic whose passion for horror and sci-fi cinema was nurtured by the pages of *Forrest Ackerman's Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine. He practiced special effects make-up and monster designs at home before turning up in 1972 as editor of his own magazine, *Cinemaghi*, devoted to the sort of B-movie classics he loved. He made the leap into film production with this debut horror/sci-fi caper, followed by a string of similar titles, *Flesh*, *Nightbeast*, *The Galaxy Invader*, *Blind Massacre* and, in 2001, *Alien Factor 2*. Home video helped his movies reach a bigger audience, but he was to climb maybe two or three rungs up the industry ladder at best, always remaining loyal to his home town. Dohler's movies are usually enjoyable, even if their only *raison d'être* is to mimic the fifties monster flicks the director clearly fell in love with as a boy. He operates, albeit shakily, on the level of craft rather than art: the fun you can have with his films depends on your willingness to enjoy his no-frills direction, whacked-out monsters and some unadorned movie clichés.

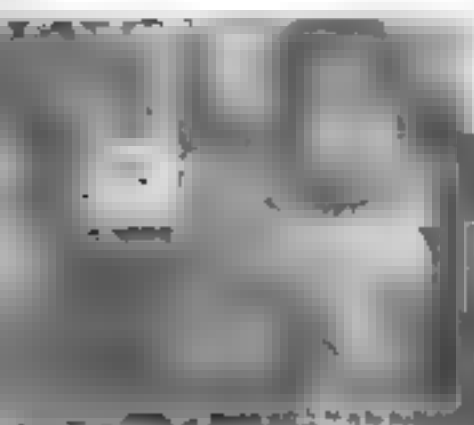
Filmed between October 1976 and March 1977, *The Alien Factor* sets the seal on the Dohler style: earnest acting, basic plotting and rampaging monsters, all shot in woodland or suburban locations. Sophisticated it ain't, but if you can accept the cheapness of the production it's a blast. Subsequent Dohlerfests like *Nightbeast* and *Flesh* show some minor technical improvements, but it's fair to say that if you can't get into *The Alien Factor* you're unlikely to make it through the others: it has the same iconoclasticness of the fifties monster movies Dohler loved, and it's all the better for it. The premise is great: a spaceship shuttling three bizarre alien creatures to an intergalactic zoo crashes (off-screen, naturally) in Maryland. (The crashed spaceship itself is really rather special, shown using a clever forced-perspective shot that bears comparison with movies ten times the budget.) The monsters run amok, attacking stray hikers and the usual denizens of Lover's Lane. Protecting the town are three (count 'em) cops, led by Tom Griffith as Sheriff (indeed, a sheepskin-coated store who turns up again in *Nightbeast* five years later). Before long, the police are joined by professional monster hunter Ben Zachary (Don Dohler), a mysterious, arrogant figure who seems strangely at ease with off-world menaces.

For all that he clearly adores his monstrous mammoths, Dohler's stories are usually built around small, but resolute groups of ordinary people struggling to defend their slice of turf. His scripts are awash with concerned cops, humanitarian doctor shopkeepers galvanised into action, and local layabouts turned monster-hunters. Civic-minded to a fault, he's also at pains to

JS: script for *The Alchemist*, making use of the more familiar evil eyes graphic

JS: artwork from top right

The Alien Dead





ronny Shattuck (see interview) was assistant director on *The Alien Factor* and plays a small part in the cast. Producer assistant John Davis went on to design the monster for Doherty's *NightBears* and the amazing creatures in *The Devil's Spawn* (see interview with Douglas McKewen). Doherty succumbed to cancer on 2 December 1986, aged 68.

Made in Maryland
see also: *Friend and NightBears*.

THE ALPHA INCIDENT

(dir. Rebore 1977)
aka *Gift from a Red Planet*

Scientists discover a space virus on a lump of Martian rock and send the samples cross-country by train, in unmarked boxes, to be examined by a specialist. Riding along to protect the shipment is Dr. Ted Sorenson (Stafford Morgan), but nosy old Hank (George 'Huck' Flower), the train-guard, gets suspicious when he notices the strange-looking boxes. When asleep, Hank steals a key and examines the cargo, accidentally cutting himself on a shattered glass vial. When the train stops off at an isolated country station, Sorenson makes a call to a secret government organisation. They inform him that Hank will have been infected with the deadly virus and Sorenson must enforce quarantine, but by now Hank has made physical contact with three more people: station-master Charlie (Ralph Meeker), his secretary Jenny (Jane Newell), and local farmer Jack T. (John Goff). Sorenson informs them that they cannot leave the station. As tension, resentment and paranoia mount up, Sorenson must use his gun to enforce order. But what exactly is the virus and what effects will it have? When an army helicopter airdrops amphetamines, along with instructions not to fall asleep, the fear and claustrophobia worsen.

point out the evils of drink-driving: a traditional scene where a drunk driver attacks a young couple necking in a car. For instance, a car accident follows hot on the heels of said couple swigging from a whiskey bottle. Soon after a boxer comes to grief, also after guzzling wine on the road. Such irresponsibility clearly has no place on a real-life Doherty shoot, the ensuing motorcycle crash, for instance, is filmed with such painstaking sobriety it's a wonder Doherty doesn't throw a few cushions to break the bike's fall. Perhaps the owner was a bona-fide Hell's Angel, and besides, replacing a dented exhaust would doubtless have crippled the whole production – when an insectoid creature attacks George Sayer in the snowy woods, the actor throws a projectile at the ground *between* them, rather than risk damaging the monster suit.

There are four different monsters in the film and three of them triumph, of the unlikely, with only the fourth – the stop-motion Lemoid – a conspicuous dud. The insectoid interbreed is an *aped Doctor Who* monster on a par with the creature in Amanda de Ossorio's *The London's Grip*, and the mope-legged *Angaric* has a special place in my heart, staggering around like a drunken giraffe or one of Leigh Bowery's more insane creations, propelled by a very brave stilt-walking stuntman. A scene in a city road, and later in a snow-caked front garden, had me far more amused for the artifice than the movie characters he was attacking. The stilt-walker slips and the poor sucker could have bashed his brains out on the edge of Doherty's rocket.

Simple and artless as the film may be, there are still moments where the rudimentary style and real-life locations knit convincingly together. Outdoor scenes have a muddy, rain-soaked verisimilitude that makes for a pleasurable contrast with the weird creature designs, the photography lending the film a naturalistic sense of place. The wintry weather helps, as well. As the aging Tom Donaherty as Zachary knows a thing or two about scene-stealing, and Kenneth Walker's pulpy music also lifts the spirits, compensating for weaker, quieter scenes with too much of Doherty's drizzling dialogue. The follow-up, *NightBears*, adds gore to the equation and is better paced – but I'd be a cat on the basis of this first film alone. Every small town should have a Don Doherty.



British video cover for Don Doherty's *The Alien Factor* (AVI also released).
Preston's enjoyable *Honeymoon Horror*.
Don Schain's *The Abductors* (also released).
Bigwood, Joe Zito's *Bloodrage*.
two classic Euro-horror: Joe Zito's *Beyond the Darkness*.
Maslow's *Island of Dr. Moreau*.

Don Doherty's *The Alpha Incident*.
Don Rebore's *The Alpha Incident*.

One of Rebane's most exotically and audacious films. *The Alpha Incident* really challenges your patience. The refusal of action and excitement in a story about the spread of an alien super-virus, is so perverse that it would be mistaken for high modernism on the stage. Not only does Rebane restrict events to a couple of small towns in a rural railway station, he's also extremely parsimonious with visual shocks: there's just one sudden and graphic eruption of horror, and that occurs over an hour into the story! The notion that sleeping makes the virus accelerate its attack on the human body is a good one, but it's tantamount to stony in a film that similarly challenges the viewer to stay awake. Rebane allows weariness to infect the film just as surely as the virus infects the cast, beginning with the musings of two overworked scientists working late at the laboratory, and moving on to Sorenson, falling asleep on the train. It's really not a good idea to have your central character doze off around the fifteen minute mark. By the time we arrive at sleepy Moose Point station, the audience need amphetamines more than the characters. Even when the drugs arrive Rebane is clearly unfamiliar with the side-effects. Instead of turning the vacuum quiet into garrulous speed-freaks, in that speed seems to do is heaven, Jerry's sexual inhibitions (a throwback to the days when anti-drug films preached that the main effect of illicit substances was to steer the kids into indiscriminate sex). The actors don't do so badly with the material, and there is a sort of claustrophobic intensity to some scenes, but you have to be an abstract-horror completist to really get a kick out of this one.

William Hall Rebane was born in Latvia in 1917 and moved to Chicago in 1952. In 1960, after making his first film *Terror at Midnight*—an unimpressive mess which, with the addition of new scenes shot by Herschell Gordon Lewis, eventually became better known as *Monster A Go-Go* (1965)—he wisely skipped town and moved to Wisconsin. Rebane learned English by going to the movies: he especially loved musicals, westerns and comedies. He eventually admitted to the website *Bjornflix* (www.bjornflix.com) that he never really liked horror movies and became typecast as a horror director against his wishes.

Made in Wisconsin
see also: The Demons of Ludlow, The Giant Spider Invasion and Rats; The Creature from Shadow Lake

ANOTHER SON OF SAM

Dave A. Adams (1977)
 aka *Hostages* [original title]

A psychopath called Harvey escapes from an asylum and goes on a killing spree at the local college campus. After being up in a room with two cued, he's chased out into the open by his abusive mother (Ann Owens), and promptly shot dead by the police.

They don't come much worse than this. Boring cops blather on to each other for seventy minutes, while the killer is depicted for the entire film with the exact same close-up of his eyes, regardless of lighting or location. A crudely prowling subjective camera stands in for the rest of him: screaming victims cower as he approaches, but there's no interaction, neither physical nor verbal. As for violence, forget it: we see Harvey's handiwork in brief glimpses, after the killing blow. Only once, after he's dead, do we see his entire body, and since Harvey does not appear on the screen credits, we never even get to find out who played him. One can only assume that former stunt-man turned producer-director Dave Adams did all this deliberately, to express his contempt for murdering scumbags (ten of whom—Jack the Ripper, John Wayne Gacy etc.—are named in a series of captions at the start of the movie). According to production manager Don Cely, the original title, *Hostages*, was changed by Adams to *Another Son of Sam*, to cash in on the case of David Berkowitz, who was in the news at the time, so the director's contempt for serial killers obviously didn't stretch so far as declining their help in selling his picture. What's especially obnoxious about the film is that Harvey, deprived of even a shred of consideration by the filmmaker, is walked into the line of fire by the mother who sexually abused him



as a child. Quite apart from the dubious wisdom of bringing her in to negotiate with her crazed son when he's locked in a room with two teenage girls, there's no recognition of the fact that this woman helped create a monster: she just turns up, does her bit for the police, and that's it. Technically, the whole enterprise is primitive in the extreme, but badly made films I can handle: belligerent, morose ones are another matter.

Another Son of Sam was shot in Charlotte and Beaufort, North Carolina. The cinematographer was Harry Jayner, the DP on *Philly Patterson & The Body Shop*. The young cast were auditioned at the University of North Carolina, and roles were also given to several local TV and radio personalities, including the self-styled 'Dean of Tampa Bay nightlife', MOR crooner Johnny Clanto, who delivers an Engelbert Humperdinckish number. Behind the cameras, Earl Owensby, alumnus and director of *4 Days of Judgment*, Charles Reynolds, worked as a grip and acted in a small role. One of the library music cues, used over and over again throughout the film, is a chilling synthesizer motif also used by David Cronenberg for his 1976 film *Rabid*.

Made in North Carolina

ASYLUM OF SATAN

William Gurdler (1977)
 aka *The Satan Spectrum*

Beautiful concert pianist Lucina Martin (Curtis Borchert) needs a rest, but she gets more than she bargained for when a man posing as her father orders her removal to a private asylum run by the sinister Dr. Jason Specter (Charles Kossinger). Unable to secure her own release, Lucina explores the asylum and sees hooded figures converging in the cellar. Her fellow patients are struggling with a variety of phobias, and Specter's methods are crudely confrontational: spiders, snakes—nothing too expensive. Lucina's boyfriend Chris Duncan (Nick Jolley) is denied entrance to visit, unlettered, he spends the rest of the film trying to save his girl before she can be sacrificed to Satan by Specter's coven.

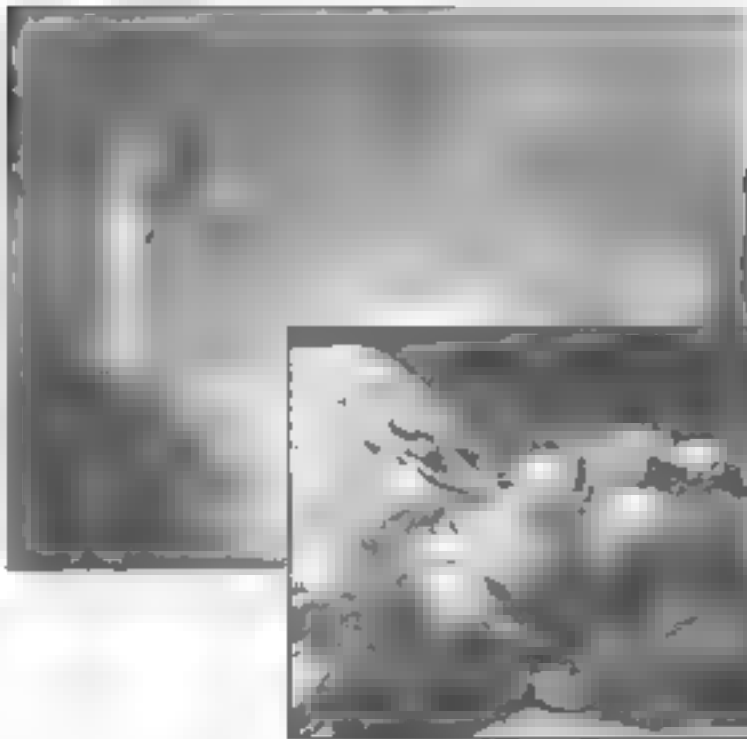
Being incarcerated in a mental hospital and victimised by the therapeutic community is one of the horror genre's favourite riffs. It's a fate that tends to be reserved for pretty girls though, with its usual flipside the escaped inmate left mainly for the boys (an honourable exception being Marc Lawrence's wonderful *Pige*). It's interesting that the most acclaimed study of a person being victimised in a mental hospital is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with Jack Nicholson's heroic male institutionalised into passivity by a controlling woman. It's a template that was then largely ignored in the exploitation arena, where the female of the species continued to suffer the indignities, invasions and psycho-surgical horrors (see

The Fifth Floor Human Experiments). Girdler's frayed and mopey-crushed debut, which of course pre-dates the Forman film, has much to say about the incarceration of the mentally. It as (sort of) next does about cuckoos, nor does it find much succour in the arms of Satan. The tale is really the most enjoyable thing about it, you're probably better off fantasising your own version. You must see it, look out for Charles Kossinger who plays two parts, as the wickedly goateed Dr. Specter and (in drag) his Tennessee heart nurse Martine. Kossinger was a Kentucky TV horror host, and he's as funny here as a Vincent Price impersonator in a Halloween television commercial. Which would be a liability, except that *Asylum of Satan* is so flat, dramatically speaking, that you welcome his overacting with gratitude. For the rest, it only remains to comment that this is the sort of film that encourages reviewers to hang on about the fashion violations of the cast – but what's the point? Today's sports-essencewear will look just as ridiculous in thirty years time.

William Girdler, a dedicated purveyor of B-movie trash probably best known for *The Manitou* (1977), was born 22 October, 1947. He learned the rudiments of film while in the Air Force, working on documentaries and educational shorts. Returning to Louisville, Kentucky in 1970, he formed his own production company, Studio One, with his brother-in-law J. Patrick Kelly. While initially making commercials, Girdler soon gathered a small technical crew and set his sights on a movie-making career. *Asylum of Satan* (from a script titled *The Satan Spectrum*) was the first of his nine theatrical features. It was financed through friends, local theatre owners, and contacts with various Kentucky entrepreneurs. Making began in the Autumn of '77 with a budget of around \$50,000. Girdler spotted *Asylum*'s lead actress Carla Borel through his ad agency contacts: she went on to appear in the well-known US TV soaps, *Days of Our Lives* and *Fab on Crest*. The sinister Dr. Jason Specter was played by Louisville's TV horror host, Charles "Fearmonger" Kossinger, who would go on to appear in nearly all of Girdler's films. The asylum of the title was an old mansion belonging to an eccentric Louisville heiress. In an interview with Girdler's biographer Patricia Breen, grip Don Wrege recalled: "[She] allowed her poodles run of the place. There was dog shit in every room. She would appear from time to time leaving in the morning with a good-looking guy... but mainly wasn't around. The [] library with a working pipe organ was covered in dog shit and hadn't been cleaned in what looked like years. Meanwhile the heiress partied every night." The rest of the film was shot at Girdler's Studio One warehouse facility.

For the climax, Girdler secured the use of the Devil costume made for Brian Pulanski's *Rosemary's Baby*, a coup perhaps lessened in impact thanks to his decision to top it off with a hokeny dime-store mark allegedly custom-made for the production but more likely won at a carnival. Hearing rumours that Church of Satan leader Anton LaVey had played Polanski's Old Nick, Girdler contacted the Califormia-based Satanist to invite his participation. LaVey was unimposed – virgins to slaughter, babies to roast, etc. but he despatched one of his demons, who flew out to Kentucky and supervised the final scenes, re-write some of the dialogue and filtered the background with props from LaVey's collection. What the Horned One thought of the finished product is not on record. Girdler died in a helicopter crash while scouting locations in the Philippines, 31 January, 1978. He was just 30 years old.

Made in Kentucky
see also: *Three on a Meatbank*

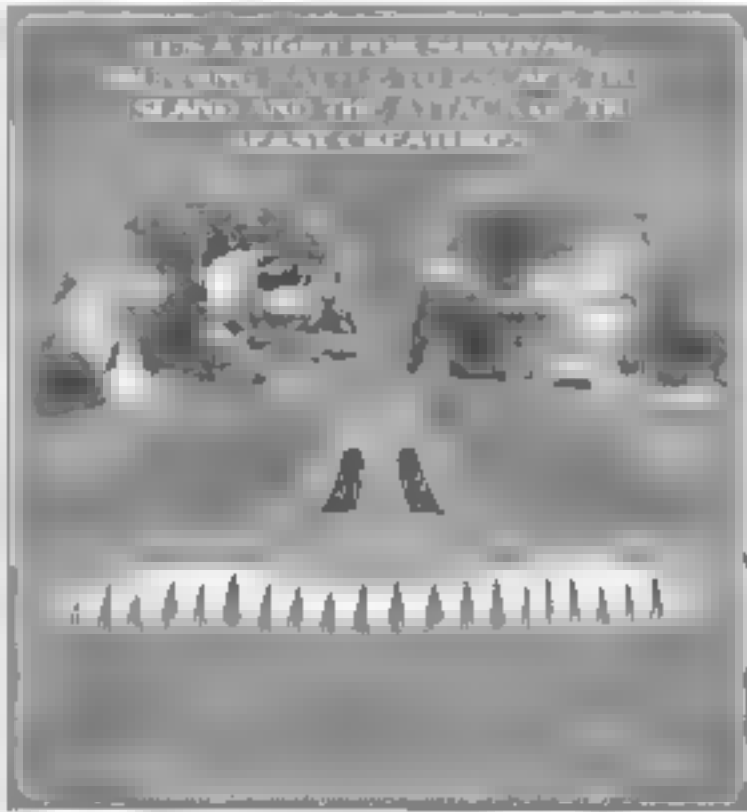


ATTACK OF THE BEAST CREATURES

Michael Stanley (1983)
aka *Hell House*

The 1930s. A ship goes down in the mid-Atlantic. A handful of Cretaceousque survivors are washed up on a leafy but apparently deserted island, along with a few of the ship's crew. Tensions flare between the sailors and a wealthy passenger called Morgan (John Victorio), but class friction is the least of their worries. The water in the island is so acidic it dissolves human flesh, and the woods are teeming with little red humanoid creatures, with razor teeth and glowing eyes.

If you weren't afraid of rats suits you could hang this out on DVD as *The Muppet Island Sacrifice*. Using puppetry techniques that make *Burnt Brush* look like the last word in animatronics, Michael Stanley's ultra-cheap monster movie may lack plausibility but at least it gives us some glossy efforts like *Ghastly* and *Troll* a run for their money. A major point of reference is Don Curtis's wonderful TV movie *Triptych of Terror* (1975), in which Karen Black lights to the death with a demon that could have been the parent of these critters. But *Triptych of Terror* was professionally directed and tightly edited: *Attack of the Beast Creatures*, sad to say, has no real sense of pacing or dramatic structure. The wacky appeal wears off after a while, due to the static nature of the puppets which, when running, are simply being jiggled along from beneath the screen. When first they appear, the red-faced creatures with long black hair



caste date of 1977. This IS video cover for Another Son of Sam does what the film does: it uses a lot of sex and gives the wife a face.

Black magic has a...
w...
Asylum of Satan

Strap this video cover for Attack of the Beast Creatures to your face and stick the eyeholes and you too can be one of the Beast Creatures – pretty much anyone.

and tiny white teeth are funny and even alarming, but I'm afraid the invisible strings suspending my disbelief snapped about halfway through the movie. Essentially, once we've seen the little vermin, the film has nothing more to offer: the camera merely following the cast laboriously back to the shore as the monsters pounce and nibble. It reminded me of Italian gore melodramas like *Fallen Ähre* and *Franziska und die Last Comedians*. Films that force you to pay for your bandwidth by watching actors wandering through endless foliage. There's no explanation of what these creatures are, indeed no one even discusses it. The whole venture would have been vastly improved if we'd learned that the homicidal ganks really are nuppiols; the result would be a sort of *alfresco Puppentheater*. Instead, what could have been cheerfully bizarre becomes silly and repetitious. Even the last line of the movie is a dud: "What were those things?" ought surely to have been, "What were those things?" Michael Stanley filmed this in Fairfield, Connecticut, in 1983. It appears to have been his only contribution to the movie industry.

Made in Connecticut

XXX

Frederick Friedel (1974)

See interview with Frederick Friedel

Made in North Carolina

THE BARN OF THE NAKED DEAD

Aian Rudolph (1977)

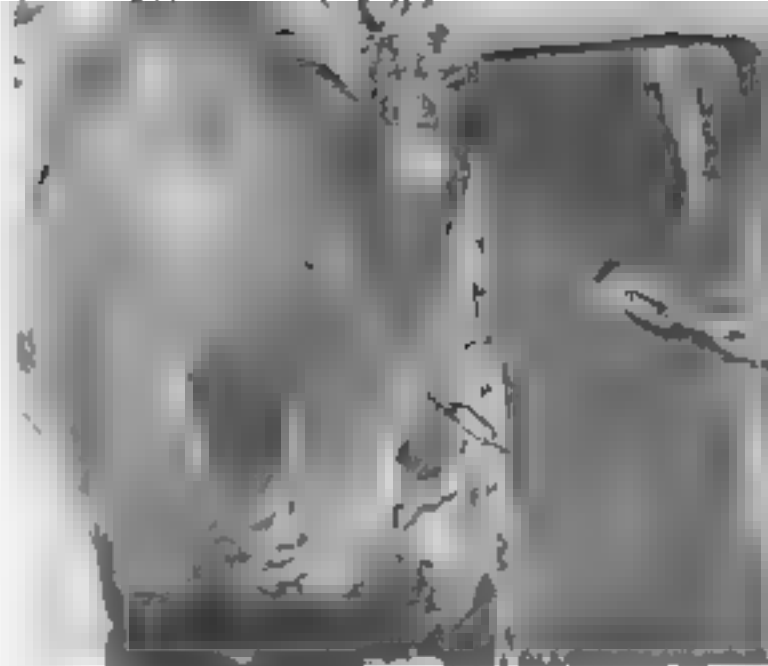
aka *Nightmare Circus*

aka *Terror Circus*

aka *Caged Women*

Three young dancers on their way to Las Vegas - Simone (Manniella Thessa), Shen (Sherry Alberoni) and Corinne (Gyl Roland) - spend the night in their car when it breaks down in the Nevada desert. Next morning they are awakened by André (Andrew Prince), a young man who offers to drive them to a telephone. Arriving at his ramshackle farm, the girls explore the outbuildings and discover a caged cougar - and a barn where nearly a dozen women are shackled to posts driven into the ground. André adds the three new arrivals to his collection, but becomes convinced that Simone is the reincarnation of his dead mother.

Shot in the Nevada desert by Aian Rudolph, this is a stentorian diatribe in the closet: for the director of *Chinatown* and *Trouble in Mind*. It's also a great vehicle for the wonderful Andrew Prince, star of *The Centerfold Girls* and *Simon, King of the Bitches*.



There's not much of a story: things grind to a halt about half-an-hour in, along with the fates of the female cast, who are shackled in the titular barn by Prince's psychopath, and occasionally forced to perform pathetic mock circus acts spurred at the end of his whip. The circus motif, however, feels barely developed, as if the story has been hurriedly convened around a collection of battered cages unexpectedly discovered at the location. (The livestock witnesses to the cougar, a snake, two skinny donkeys, and a couple of chicks. A single dialogue exchange early on, between a theatrical agent and his secretary, refers to the famed Las Vegas venue, *Circus Circus* (a hotel resort and casino) with pulchritudinous live entertainment.) Perhaps it's an attempt to link the sleazy goings-on at André's farm to a broader sense of female exploitation, but Rudolph is really pushing his luck: this is definitely not the place to pontificate on such matters.

The Barn of the Naked Dead (or *Terror Circus* as it was originally called) does have some merit as a downbeat exercise mood. The washed-out earth colours of the desert, the steel grey of the sky, the forlorn disarray of the old farm buildings and the scurvy collection of animals exude a hopeless, depressive feel which perhaps accounts for the captives' lack of effort to escape. Certainly the minimal 'brutality' we observe doesn't really explain why the spirit of these women has been so totally broken. We never even see André with a gun, the suggestion being that he has empowered his captives by force of personality alone. Female viewers in particular will regard the scene where three new girls are captured, apparently without fighting back, unbelievable to the point of offensiveness. (For an interesting contrast, see Don Jones's *Atchafaluy*, where the victims show a great deal more initiative and courage.) Rudolph himself seems embarrassed by the far-fetched scenario, cutting away so as to avoid explaining how three fit young women are shackled by one unarmed man.

Depicting women as physically weak is one thing, to show them as slow-witted is quite another. André unshackles Simone because he thinks she's his dead mother returned to life - but when she's untied she then watches, without a word, as he bullwhips friend, when it would surely have occurred to her to use her new-found 'maternal authority' to stop him. André drags one out to the cougar cage, and as the creature snarls, he dabs the girl's dress with cow's blood - while telling her she can go. The victim naively imagines she's being freed, when it's blindingly obvious she's about to be hunted down by the hungry carnivore. Indicts the scriptwriter not the character.

Frankly, much of this would be quite annoying. If it wasn't for Prince, who is by far the most interesting circus act in town. He chews the scenery for sure, but he can swivel on a dime and he genuinely unsettling. Whether he's menacing a bound victim with a python ("You're going to learn her ways. His movements. You're going to get inside of him. And he's going to get inside of you") or explaining to Simone why the victims are never missed ("I am never these little animals are in the jungle. The jungle has a very short memory"), he plays the part with the gusto it needs, rescuing the film from the doldrums.



The female exploitation theme barely registers, but a recurrent theme about the Army's use of the Nevada desert for nuclear testing was obviously intended to be noticed. However, for a director whose first film, *Premeditation* (1970), took the hippy culture to its logical extreme into fifties steam-bath paranoid smacks of respectation, if you're going to bash the Establishment in order to beef up your sleazier fantasies, fine, but take a cudgel not a cash-register. Prince is rather deformed and mutilated by atomic radiation, stalks the farmstead and occasionally picks off a fleeing animal, although why he attacks his son later on remains a mystery. At this (otherwise arbitrary plot device – sorry, character) ensures that all does not end well, for the shed full of victims awakes the viewer with a fantastically cold, empty sensation. Rudolph is respected as a left-of-centre explorer of the human psyche, the sort of figure who might one day direct something educated people could agree was the cinematic equivalent of *The Great American Novel*. How surprising then to see, looking at the quieter end of his CV, this considerably less salubrious title. Rudolph never talks about *The Barn of the Naked Dead* in *Premeditation*, and they are rarely cited in books or studies of his career. Of course they were both made when he was still quite young, but since they're out there on videotape, his name on them, I'm surprised he's unwilling to at least put them into context. There's certainly an interesting tale to be told about the gap between this movie (shot in January 1973) and his guarded drama *Watermark to I.A.*, made just three years later. I generally treated as his first film. During this time, Rudolph took up a close working relationship with Robert Altman, who

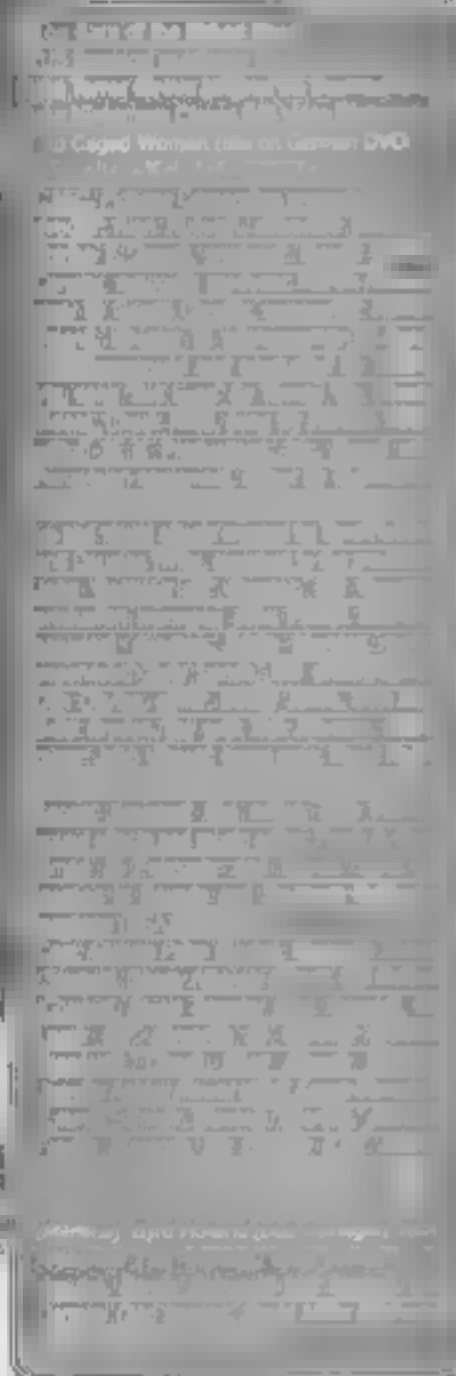


gave him the second assistant director's role on *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *California Split* (1974), and the assistant director's job on *Nashville* (1975), perhaps it was Altman who urged him to suppress his juvenilia and start over.

Technical work on the movie is all fairly competent, and from the frequent tracking shots and confident handling of the actors you can get that Rudolph has talent. All of the film's real flaws are attributable to the script by 'Gerard Cornier' and 'Roman Valent'. The print under review is the Australian video with the screen title *The Barn of the Naked Dead*, and Rudolph receives clear directorial credit under his own name. Other sources have reported the film as *directed* by Gerard Cornier, leading to the likely supposition that this is in fact a Rudolph pseudonym, in which case he wrote and produced as well as directed the film (it wouldn't be the first time: Rudolph is credited with at least three roles in *Premeditation*). The original version, *Terror Caverns*, or a subsequent retitling of the movie as *Nightmare Caverns*, may have used the Cornier name as director, but I've been unable to check these prints.

Vin Rudolph was born 8 December 1943. His father Oscar Rudolph, worked on many classic arthouse TV shows, like *The British Band*, *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Barney*. Fans of the un-mated series *Josey and the Pussycats* may be interested to know that Pussycat voice-artist Sherry Alberoni plays one of the new girls in *Barn*. The plot bears similarities to the later case of Robert Hansen, of Anchorage, Alaska, who between 1977-1981 kidnapped and sexually abused seventeen women: he then turned the naked victims loose in the country, gave them a head start, and tracked them down with a high-powered hunting rifle. The victims included prostitutes, topless dancers, and bartenders. He was eventually caught thanks to one escapee's testimony: ballistics evidence ensured he received life imprisonment.

Made in Nevada and California



Images from *The Barn of the Naked Dead*

The 'Naked' scene

Andre, Andrew, and the woman

Andre, the egg

Andre, the egg

BASKET CASE

Frank Henenlotter (1981)

Does this evergreen splatter favourite really need a synopsis? Young Duane Bradley (Kevin Van Hentenryck) moves into a terminally seamy New York hotel, with only a mysterious wicker basket for company. A succession of people enquiring "What's the basket?" soon reveal their curiosity, for inside is Duane's horribly deformed Chinese twin brother Beihai, a dented ball of flesh, with sharp teeth, powerful claws, and one hell of a temper. Duane and Beihai were separated, against their will, by a trio of quack doctors (Jimmie Brownie, Lloyd Pace and Hill Freeman), who added insult to injury by leaving Beihai to die in the crash. Now the brothers are reunited, scolding the Big Apple for the surgeons' responsibility, so that Beihai can reach vengeance by slashing them all to ribbons.

Shot cheaply on weekends during 1980, this story of "a mad ghoul jack-in-the-box" to quote director Frank Henenlotter is that rare thing: an exploitation film made by a diehard fan which holds its own alongside the movies that inspired it. It's a splatter-comedy that nevertheless plays the genre game to the hilt. Henenlotter has his cake, eats it, and hurls it at the viewer at the same time, with a film that is simultaneously a slice of authentic Big Apple seamy, a parody of the same, and a here's mud-in-your-eye attack on the expectations of cult film viewers who thought they'd seen it all. It's also a gentle piece of character comedy, and intriguingly shows the beginnings of a humanitarianism that would flourish in *Brain Damage* (whose young male lead provided some impress beefcake in a genre where visual gay interest is fleeting at best).

Basket Case is touching without being cloying (which is where the sequels went wrong). It's sweet and sour, mean and silly, grossy and generous, hovering between extremes in a far more dexterous, playful way than most of the 42nd Street sleaze, with which Henenlotter drew his inspiration. The gore is OTT in the point of violence, and we know we're being encouraged in our laughter by the filmmaker, who sets up his blood-spewing sequences with the loving eye of a true H.C. Lewis fan. When a particularly deserving victim receives a face quilled with scalpels we're seeing the true progeny of Lewis's *Con. Con. Girls* joyously delivered for the 1980s. Henenlotter was a first generation gorehound, a fan of *It* and *Hg* before there really was a trash-movie cult scene to speak of. Crucially he was also creative enough to add his own brand of manic humour to excesses borne of Lewis's *Brat* and Andy M. Higan's *The Abominable Jones*. A true midnight movie mutant, *Basket Case* plays like a hybrid of Lewis's peculiar sadism and John Waters's affectionate sickness.

And not unlike the Waters films, *Basket Case* savagely deceives. Despite the gore, the true heart of the film is fraternal love and the sanctity of life. There's a terrific touching scene where the young Duane (Sean McCabe), having undergone surgical separation from his conjoined twin, sneaks out of the junkie and finds his twisted little brother in a black refuse sack next to the rubbish bins, abandoned but still alive. Duane lovingly rescues tiny Beihai, and it's this almost Dickensian moment that provides the cynical comedy and blood-bath of the film with its emotional counter-balance. Echoes of Yogi Bowering's *Breaker* are perhaps only really explored in the sequels, but the implication is that life – at least post-humous life – is sacred, not exactly a common theme at 42nd Street theatres of the time.

Not that the film is some earnest moral tract. There's intelligence alright, but it's twinned with a grimy quality that unites perfectly with the mawgier celluloid denizens of *The Deers*. *Basket Case* would happily sit on a double bill with *The Headless Eyes*, and my recommendations don't come much higher than that. Putting a sleazy sexual spin on an old horror movie cliché, *Basket Case* includes a scene where the monster eats-out the girl (a sick joke that finds its echo in the blow-job scene of *Brain Damage*). Some reviewers claim that Beihai's

rape, murder and necrophiliac molestation of the heroine add a sour note to an otherwise effective black comedy, and it's true that the film lurches into a place less warmly amusing at this point. By opting for such a gloomy climax, though, Henenlotter is simply following the current of the times, before unhappy endings were ushered out of the genre in favour of survivalist heroics or low-explodes-an-eyeballs.

Judging by Henenlotter's interviews, and his brisk, friendly commentary tracks, deeper discussion of his movies' themes is a non-starter. He embodies a passionately self-effacing, practical down-to-earth tendency in American filmmaking, where the greatest sin is pretension. He's a terrific raconteur and provides a most energetic commentary on the *Something Weird* DVD release of *Basket Case*, which I recommend you hear. He's also unstintingly generous to the cast: "It's the people in front of the camera who made this work, because there was nobody behind the camera!" You can tell he's a proud parent though, by the way he asserts "Fifteen years from now this is still going to be ugly and offensive".

And for all his bluff hearty demeanour, Henenlotter is a mercurial guy whose intellect cannot help but give itself away. Perhaps the most telling example is the way that Beihai's rape of Sharon (Teri Susan Smith) ties in with an earlier scene in which an aunt (Ruth Neenan) reads to Duane and Beihai from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The lines are Caliban's, beginning "Be not afraid, the air is full of noises, sounds and scents that give delight, and hurt not." The reference is far from gratuitous: in *The Tempest* Caliban is referred to as a beast or monster by Prospero. He rapes Miranda, Prospero's daughter, and yet Shakespeare gives him a poetic sensitivity depicted with sympathy, not disgust: an outsider who, orphaned by society, could hardly be expected to know any better. Prospero calls him "A devil, a born devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick." It's this assessment that is extending to his monster. Seen in this light, the rape-murder is an inevitable reflection of Beihai's savage instincts, and having already enjoyed his vengeance, we cannot so easily withdraw our sympathy.



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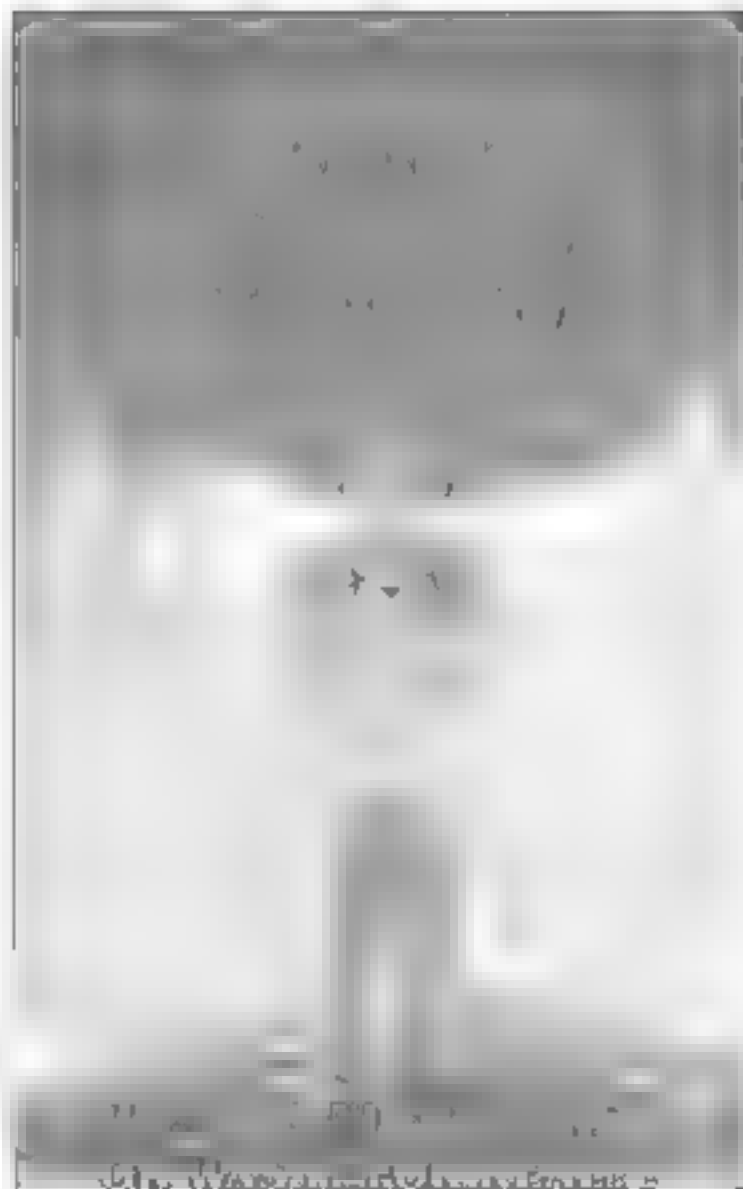
of and rapes Sharon. Teri Susan Smith's worth noting that in Christianity, a demon is said to be a demon of lust, so frequently translated from as without worth significant to *Basket Case*, since this is the attitude of the and doctors who separate Beihai from



Screen poster for Chester M. Turner's *Black Devil Drift from Hell* entry in the possessed doll series.

... US poster for *Bloodrage* shows a killer more eager to overpower women than the sunny youth who actually stars in the film.

... Andy Milligan's marvelous *Blood* made its video-only appearance on video in the early 90s, via the UK's over Film Services.



... ve got to be careful not to overkill this: it really is the pits of Phloia, awesomely so. At best, *Black Devil Drift from Hell* stampedes to a distant second in the queue, behind the psychedelic brainstorm that is *Floundering Intoxica*, whenever shot-on-video horror madness is uppermost in your mind. How's that for qualified praise? The same director essayed a second shot-on-video horror called *Tales from the Quadead Zone* in 1987. It falls outside the scope of this book for a year or two, but, if anything, could tempt me to write a follow-up covering the years 1986 to the present day if would be a conversation with a bona-fide eccentric, like Chester Turner. If nothing else we might find out what on Earth 'Quadead' means.

Turner remains an elusive figure, and the film gives no clues as to his location. The Rev. Olio Junker, who appears as himself in the film delivering a sermon in Church, is currently pastor of the New Pasadena Baptist Church in Chicago, which suggests that *Black Devil Drift from Hell* could well have been made in Illinois. Therefore we can thankfully assume that our man is not the same Chester Turner who raped and murdered nine women in the Los Angeles area between 1987 and 1998.

Made in: unknown (I think?)

THE BLACK ROOM

Norman Thaddeus Vane and Fay Jenner (9%)
See interview with Norman Thaddeus Vane.

Made in California

BLOOD

Andy Milligan (1974)

... ve been fascinated by Andy Milligan ever since reading a feature about him in *Fantasia* back in the early 1980s. His films sounded weird, odd, bizarre and he titles *The Church Ones*, *The Bloodthirsty Butchers*, *Torture Dungeon* – promised all manner of depravity. I was also intrigued to learn that many horror aficionados held his work in contempt, deploring it as unbearably cheap and sloppy. Here it seemed was a director even B. G. Lewis fans

could look down on. *Blood* was the first Milligan movie I saw and I began by feeling the usual 'bad film' vibe of detached amusement. Twenty minutes in, though, I was totally engaged. I vowed then and there that I would watch as much Milligan as humanly possible.

Well, the 'humanly possible' clause turned out to be a useful caveat, excusing me from Milligan's work beyond 1986, but I'm still very much a fan. Milligan, who died on 3 June 1991, operated on a different plane to the rest of horror cinema, but to me he fulfilled one of the major aesthetic criteria: the world he created is consistent, and distinct from any other. Who cares if that world is to put it mildly – a place not everyone wants to visit? Andy Milligan made movies that deserve to be considered as art. Every cramped shot and overstuffed line of dialogue communicates an ethos and a vision of the world. You simply don't make films like this if you're in it for the money, or the prestige of being a director, or because your investors agreed it was a sound business move. Andy Milligan, bless his wicked soul, was an artist.

And yet, even some who can appreciate the man's work turn up their noses at *Blood*, claiming that its comparatively prime-free 16mm photography lessens the Milligan magic. Talk about specialisation. For you, dear reader, it's probably like insisting that a broken leg is preferable to a fractured skull. But don't think you can suther away to A&E yet. In Milligan's universe everyone is smashed, broken or damaged in some way, or if not then soon to be. Besides, there's an uncommon lightness in the air this is hanging around and ask yourself if this is perhaps Milligan's version of *The Adams Family*. *Blood* is a Monster Medley that flummoxes all the classic Milligan hallmarks, but in a way that feels curiously ironic. Yes, I know, given the dizzying lack of realism in Milligan's films, it might seem a quixotic aim to establish parody. And yet *Blood*, for me, is a horror-comedy, arch and deliberately absurd. I'd say it's the most sheerly enjoyable Milligan film.

We open with an image of roses blooming in a well-tended front garden. An seems well with the world, a benign impression that is allowed to accumulate for just a few precious seconds before Milligan's unique delirium sweeps it away along with a thoughts of 'normal' cinematic values. We are dealing here, in case you want to know, with a scenario that demands the sort of The Woman. Dr. Orlofski (Alan Berendt), should intuitively have married Regina, Count Dracula's daughter (Hope Manshury). We have to guess that Orlofski believes his wife really is Dracula's daughter, despite him seeing her plastic tongs fall out. But these are mere details. Why, downstairs, Carrie the maid (Jill Gaul) is going about her chores, tending to Orlofski's collection of carnivorous plants, with a boil on her leg the size of a watermelon. As the camera struggles, with her, to negotiate cramped interior of what was then Milligan's own home, we made painfully aware of the sheer awkwardness of running this household. Carrie is a devoted Catholic, something of a problem when the lady of the house is, shall we say, indisposed to The Cross. Walking in on the maid blessing a pot roast, a furious Regina shrieks that the offending symbol be hidden away. 'I have a right to my own beliefs', snaps Carrie, ringing a Chalice and a vampire forced to live in the same house. It's like a meat-spirited reality TV show, with participants chosen for maximum friction. Orlofski (Michael Facchetti), a legless manservant in a wheeled trolley, and a senile, slavering woman called Carrie's 'Proculina Hampt', make up the household. If only there was to tell their stories.

Milligan's primary trademark is talk: lots of it. Characters of best tertiary importance – like Prudence Towers (Pamela Adams), Mr. Reel's secretary – can suddenly erupt with passionate intensity ('I never realised until now how much really trouble you're often holding forth on their own troubles, distending the subjective time frame of the movie. These characters continue until the clamour of minor characters has obscured the basic storyline. I don't think it's entirely pretentious to suggest that there's significance in Milligan's profligate verbosity.

of giving even the low-rent case a respect and a humanity personal to say I'm not calling him a Communist, although a Godard-in-the-rough; but Molligan's generosity with it draws no distinction between the lead actors and the 'ed help', a quality that links him to such alternative universe stars as John Waters and Paul Morrissey. Perhaps it's part of why many directors can have to the marginalised and the outcast. I saw Molligan's *The Marsh* at The Cino Theatre New York in 1961). Whatever the reason, the hierarchies of the world of the film's incidental characters usurp main cast scenes as doubt or significance swarm the viewer's vision. Fleeting extras assume the traits of the most favoured. It's this melange of the loaded and the casual that gives Molligan's dialogue its deranged excess. It can be over-type and over-the-top. "Go to hell!" "He's there already!" Or contemptuously between registers: the primly delivered protestation, "Mr. [Name] is an extremely rude and stingy man!" The inevitability of *Blush* (Keenan Cleary) and *Peep* (Eve Crossby as an y-come-cum-blackmailer), inspires an auditory dizziness matched by the very glib camera technique favoured by most hands-on directors. Molligan wrote, shot, directed, & edited his films, as well as designing the costumes. The theatre is of prime importance to Molligan: the films are cinematic. This is a man who devoted a vast amount of his greasepaint and boards, who, when he received the customary pitance to make a movie, drew on theatrical, not cinematic, inspiration. As Jimmy McDonough revealed in his previous book on Molligan, *The Ghettocore One*, Andy's prime contribution to the technical language of cinema is the instruction "kiss camera" – a phrase written on his scripts to denote a scene of sexual intensity. Time and again, climactic sequences in his work end with the camera shuddering away from a glimpsed gore effects to wildly scan the sky, the floor, or the face of Molligan, who always operated his camera, having had a fit. Bad camerawork? I don't think so. Molligan seems to go for this device when he wants to penetrate the essential truth of the form. In theatre you are there, watching, the audience are there – be addressed directly. Molligan's skilful camera distraction is borne of sheer frustration at the act of someone who prefers direct communication. When he is in camera, he means what he says. Molligan is easy to mock and dismiss, as has been proved by my over the years. He is also very difficult to write about, especially if you want to add him to some pantheon or other. His poses are so florid you feel like a collaborator with Dostoyevsky, not offer so much as a simple précis. Frankly, I could write another five thousand words about this film alone (so be grateful, not in a selfish mood). But urge you to see *Blush* – it's a brilliant Movie waiting to happen, and in some real parallel to the world of the film. On July playing to packed houses, the audience addressed as their favourite characters, stars of stage and screen are to appear in the Broadway musical version, and Molligan talk of the Town. God, I wish I lived there.

Made In New York City

RECOMMENDATION

Joseph Bigwood (Joseph Zito) 1974

Never Pick Up a Stranger

Richie (Ian Scott) is a withdrawn young man with an undeniable hatred of women, who Beverly (Judith Marie Berzan) small-town hooker, during an altercation about money. Carefully planning his crime, he goes on the run to New York, trailed by Ryan (James Johnson), a cop who's holding a torch for the victim. Living in a seedy apartment block, Richie works his way through several more female victims, before Ryan learns of his plan.

A depressing serial killer story with a cop-vengeance chaser. *Blondage* does penance for its many flaws with an effectively grimy mood, playing scene after scene in peeling-wallpaper

merits and piss-soaked New York alleys. Ian Scott, whose hair looks like it dropped from a head that had been in a freezer, is a creepy-looking kind of like Christopher Walken's plain kid brother, but he lacks genuine screen presence and often fails to make the grade dramatically. A scene involving a victim he meets in a bar, Lucy (Blair Trigg), is hampered by the implausibility of this skinny teenager overpowering a healthy older woman. Scott doesn't sell the character, and we can't help but feel that the only reason he succeeds in threatening her is because the director cuts to the attack already in progress and has probably instructed the actor not to stage a kill.

Joseph Bigwood – actually a pseudonym for the soon-to-be successful slash writer Joseph Zito – amuses himself by using the story to hang on a washing line of influences, perhaps hoping to catch the eye of the studios. He succeeded, but not with this picture: his efficient 1981 slash tale *The Prowler* got him a gig directing *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter*, the fourth film in the series for Paramount. Judging by *Blondage*, Zito was a big fan of Scorsese and Hitchcock, the urban street squint and



killer's voice-over mimic *Taxi Driver*, the prologue's post-murder clean-up scene is a direct lift from *Psycho*, and Richie's spying on the occupants of an apartment block from his window explicitly quotes *Rear Window*. Meanwhile, the score by Michael Karp is Hellenesque to the point of plagiarism. Where the film fails is in its failure to connect these references into an overall style, not least because it seems to have been edited together from separate shoots. Scott's hair changes noticeably between the opening scenes and the rest. The laughably arbitrary resolution (in which Ryan tracks Richie down after seeing him by chance at a building stand, an encounter we hear about but never see) may actually have been forced on the production by lack of money. The running time is a brusque 49 minutes, so either the film had to be finished minus a few days shooting, or some of the material was so weak it had to be excised. Perhaps the biggest problem with *Bloodrage*, though, is that even at such a short length it outstays its welcome, thanks to some repetitious peeping tom scenes that drag on unnecessarily. Rita Ebenhart as Candice, Richie's foulmouthed Jewish neighbour, gives the film a much-needed shot in the arm, and cultish tough-guy Lawrence Tierney turns up to sympathise with Ryan and mutter a few curses about how hard it is being a cop when criminals have rights. The overall tone is not dissimilar to Robert Altman's *Don't Answer the Phone!*, another NYC serial-killer saga with a right-wing attitude to law enforcement. *Don't Answer the Phone!*, though, is a skillfully obnoxious film that hooks with your head, and it features a blistering lead performance; the lead attitude in *Bloodrage* is not so well decorated.

Zito's first film was *Abduction* (1975), a whodunnit headline explainer which at first glance appears to be about the Patty Hearst case, except that it's based on a novel called *Black Abduction* by Harrison James, which actually preceded Hearst's abduction. By spinning the James novel, Zito was able to make a film seemingly about the Patty Hearst case; the lead character is even called 'Patricia' without the threat of a libel action. Patricia was played by Judith-Maria Bergan, i.e. Beverly in *Bloodrage*. Made in New York City.



BLOODY BIRTHDAY

1976, 1981

aka *Creech*

aka *Hickman on Kill*

Three babies born during a solar eclipse develop into purebred psychopaths, who celebrate their tenth birthday by going on a murder spree and killing anyone who gets on their nerves (others, sisters, best friends and – probably – people who use the word 'cunt').

The logic behind all this is, to say the least, rather shaky with the psychological explanation (something to do with Saturn, the planet of emotion, being blocked by the sun and moon, failing to clarify why it takes ten years for the kids to start killing). (A brief Google search indicates that various astrologers consider the planet of emotion to be either Mars, Venus, or that other well-known planet, i.e. The Moon. Whatever.) Nevertheless, I found this a surprisingly taut and enjoyable horror thriller. Basically, it's a washer movie with a scream of *The Bad Seed* and some delicious *Children of the Dunes* copping, making it another ideal choice for a killer-kid a nighter, along with Sean MacGregor's *Devil Times Five*, Mark Kastenowicz's *The Children*, John H. Land's *The Orphan* and Robert Voskanian's *The Children* (with maybe *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* for variation).

I used to see this movie around on video all the time in the early 1980s, but for some reason I never rented it (a mild review from Alan Jones in *Starburst* perhaps stayed my hand). In a way, it gave me left it so long, as it offered me a time capsule of vintage pleasure from a period I thought I'd more or less exhausted. The last bruised apple at the bottom of the barrel. No, there are some genuinely well-crafted suspense scenes here, along with decent acting and even a slight emotional kick, as film concentrates not only on the killings, but also on the grief of those like Nicola Cordell's Mrs. Brady or even with a voice, who've lost real yes or friends to the mystery killers. It doesn't hurt, either, that the suburban tree-lined locations are so similar to those in John Carpenter's *Halloween*: you keep expecting the kids to bump into Laurie Strode or crazy Doc Loomis. *Halloween* is sure to have played a big part in the inception of this story.

Of the three young stars, two are outstanding. Elizabeth Hays as cunning, manipulative 'angel-face' Debbie, and Billy Jacob (later known as Billy Jayne) as the nerdy but threatening Curtis make even the silliest scenes work. Andy Freeman as Steven given less to do and consequently loses out, fading into the background somewhat, although he did appear more frequently in the promotional stills. Even the 'good' kid, Timmy (K.C. Mann) makes a go of it, being likeable enough to occasionally deflect our black-hearted, suspicious identification with the bad seeds.

Some viewers may find the film tasteless and offensive for casting children as killers, but the kids themselves quite clearly relish their roles. Each of the three were either fresh to another horror project or destined to act in more of the same. Jay turned up in *Hospital Massacre* three years later, as did Jacob, soon by enough, he also took roles in *Supernatural* (1982), *Cujo* (1983), *Nightmares* (1983), *Demons* (1984), and *Dr. Death* (1988). Freeman has had the leaner time of it since appearing in *The Corpse Grinders 2* (2000); poor dev. Mann was already an old hand at the horror game, having played the Little Rascals' kid in quasidramatic smash *The Amityville Horror* the year before. Anyway, given the macabre imagination children bring to their own games, I'd say that adult misgivings are the result of forgetting what it's like to be a child. Ask a group of ten-year-olds which boy'd most like to act in a horror film or a recreation of the Hairy Ape, and I warrant you'll get an answer that would make Jesus himself despair.

The movie has weaknesses though, if has to be said. For instance, why do Curtis and Steven not attack their families when Debbie attacks hers? The explanation would mean speeding up the narrative to fit them all in, but fine – that sounds



ke an answer to the film's fluctuating tension. Aron Ober's scene is somewhat locked in that TV-movie style of workaday horn and surge arrangements, redolent of shows like *Law & Order*. The more exciting moments would like Hurr's Manhattan, which of course would have made a better suit at it. And I know it shouldn't really matter, but the story is often extremely far-fetched and absurd: a little girl is able to brotife a young woman with a skipping-rope, and a small boy knocks two men with a baseball bat (possible) and one with the flat side of a spade (unlikely). Young Curtis seems to handle police-issue revolver with ease, recoil and all, and a cop is beaten to death and his injuries blamed on a fall down approximately five garden steps. But let's not be too strict about all this. We have to take a forgiving attitude. Regard the flaws with indifference and look what you get in return: not only is the cop killed early on, but he's set up for a by his own sweet little laughter, who watches impassively as her buddies bash his brains in. One malicious little tyke locks his playmate in an old unkind refrigerator and leaves him to suffocate. And the entire eat poison birthday cake scene had me snickering into my jelly and yelping as I saw star-chum Sharon blocked by the sun and moon. Be honest: movies where kids murder adults are the perfect antidote to that nasty old sadism Steven Spielberg, who routinely victimizes child characters. Sure *Bloody Birthdays*'s gore levels are quite restrained, but when Debbie kills her older sister by firing an arrow into her eye, we can surely cheer the without demanding that Lucio Fulci step in to direct!

Bloody Birthdays was made in the USA by Ed Hunt, a Canadian who often crossed the border to direct films both in his native country and the States. Hunt began his career with two softcore sex films (*Assure Palace* in 1973 and *Diary of a Woman* in 1974), before turning to sci-fi with a trio of films shot by David Cronenberg's first regular DP, Mark Irwin: *Point of No Return* (1976), *Starship Invasions* (1977) and *Plague* (1978). Producer Gerald Wilson went on, during the eighties, to become Director of Production at HBO and a Vice President of

Production at New Line, and later executive produced the comedy hit *Funny and Slightly* (1994). Walter Barry Pearson also wrote two more films for Ed Hunt: the Canada-released *When I Arrive* (1985) and *The Brain* (1988).

Finally, a word about credits. Perhaps you've noticed already that movies starring children frequently credit the adults first, often giving above-the-title priority to actors who may deserve third or fourth billing, and relegating the young leads who've acted their socks off to also-ran status. It's a convention that strikes me as outrageously unfair, and it gives me an idea for a sequel. How about *Bloody Birthdays* 2, with disgruntled child actors bumping off adult actors?

Made in: unknown

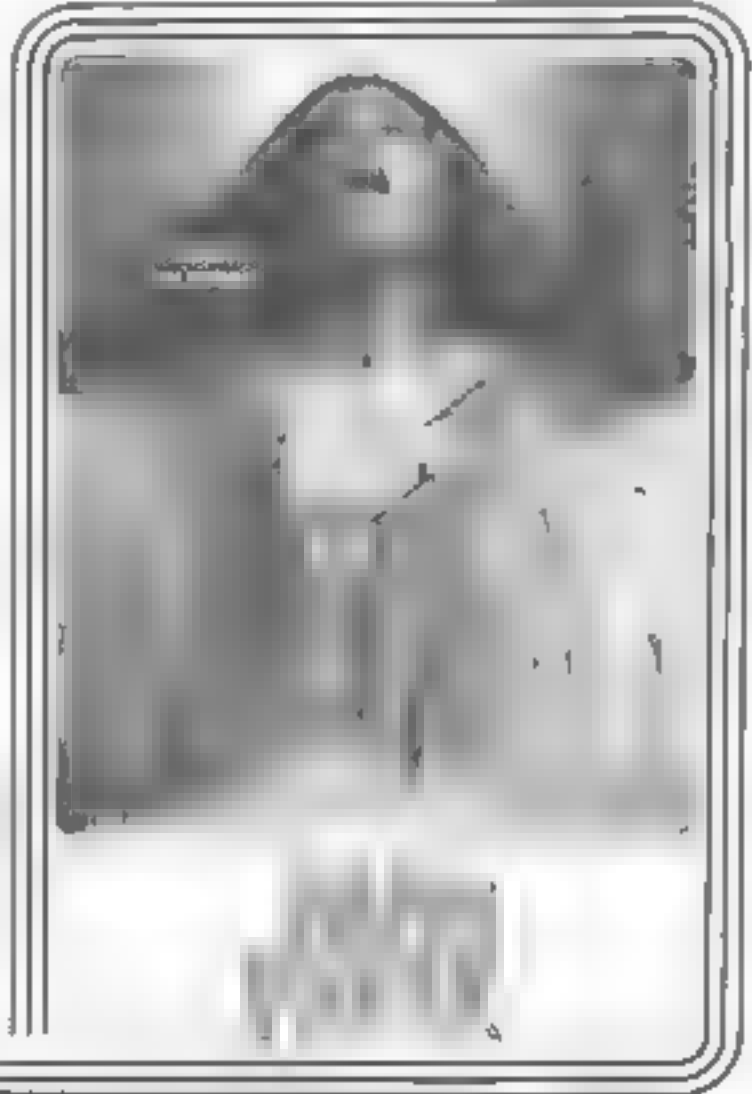
BLOOD FREAK

Brad F. Granger (Frank Merriam Granger) and Steve Hawkes

aka *Blood Freaks*

Who said Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* was unfilmable? His relocates the story from early 20th century Prague to Miami, Florida in the early 1970s: the a Metamorphosis is poultry-related not bug-related, and I guess some sort of license has been taken with the hero's need for the blood of dope-fiends, but hey, it's a lot more fun than Welles's *The Trial*.

Hersche (Steve Hawkes), a muscle-bound lunk with a greasy quiff and a truckers' post-nasal air about him, is dating Angel, a nice, trimmer girl, who introduces him to her sex-pot sister, Ann. Ann promptly takes a shine to the big fella, and rather than let all that bee go to waste on Miss Groovy Two-Shoes (Betty Ann), he's through preaching to him, he'll be so screwed up I won't have a choice. So she seduces him into bed by turning him on to marijuana. At first Hersche is resistant to the sure call of drugs, but he caves in when Ann calls him a coward. Then, after manipulating the hero by casting doubt on his manliness work again soon after when two agricultural boys (the two boys) use their experimental guinea-pig, using the same strategy. The experiment involves Hersche eating specially modified turkey meat, cue catastrophe, as his body (and mind) go into a drug cocktail meltdown, leaving him with weird after-effects. How to put this? His head mutates into a turkey's head.



Ever Film Services released *Bloody Birthdays*

This US promo art for Brad Granger's *Blood Freak* seems to work as a



Blood Mania

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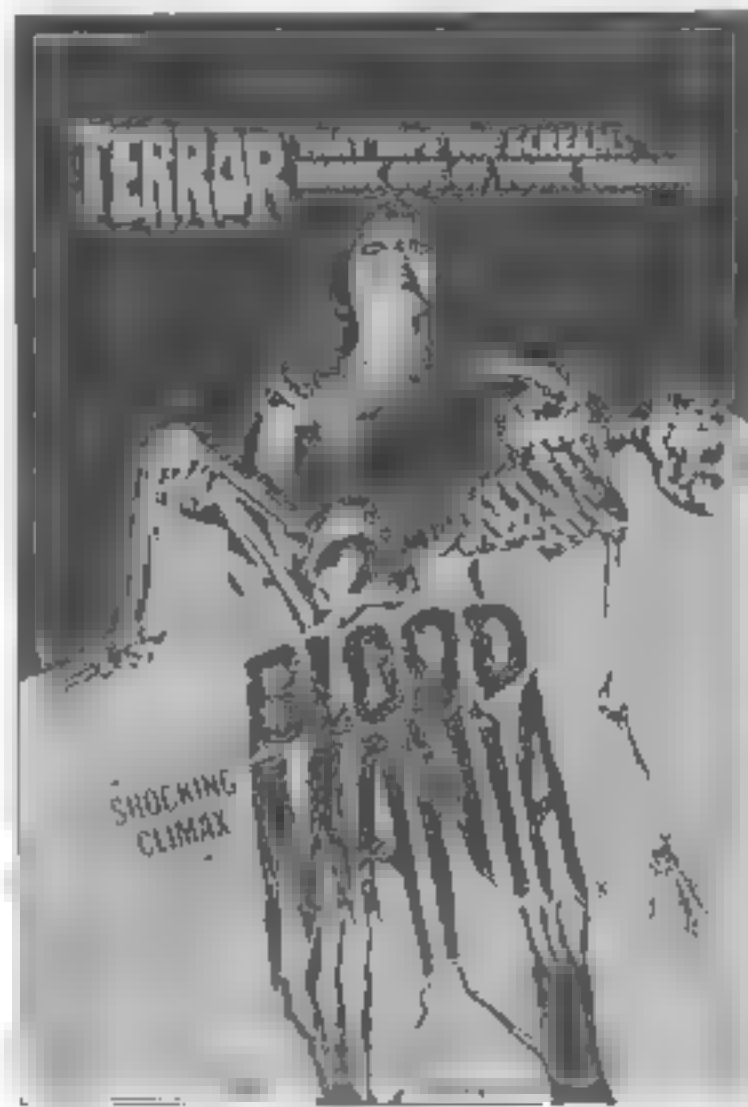


Just Her. If you were my girl," says Aunt, when she asks him his new look. "The first time," but turkey-head he has not she says. "I wish he didn't do that body, pledging to stick by her sister's flesh and bone," that may. "What will our children look like?" she sighs. I like Aunt, she knows what she wants and she won't be browed off. She seems fit a few readers and a break.

It's so weird. It's like out of Star Trek or The Twilight Zone," he tells her drug dealer. "Well, it's weird alright, and I'm sure Mr. Spock would find the turkey-headed hunk's thimble for the blood of drug-addicts fascinating, but what really warps this intimacy is the coarse thread of Christian piety running through it. I wonder, can *Blood Fresh* ever have played in Revue-style venues?" I wish I did love to have seen the faces of the congregation on the way out, especially since the film climaxes with an awesome dose of power-boat mayhem, a true "Legs Cut Off" moment that could hold its own in *Blood Feast* or *The Diamond Merchant*. In fact, with a heavy enough subtitle, it's possible that a theatrical release of *Blood Fresh* could be warranted to the Cinecittà Gore house, after all. I must have known Lewis socially and acted for him in his obscure movie, *Heaven* (1964).

[illegible]

According to Charles K. in the short-lived but excellent *nightclub* magazine, "Orin entered acting initially through the Florida dinner theatre circuit. He occasionally wrote or co-wrote the productions he acted in, which were usually risqué comedies."



with literary or sociological pretensions," wonder how *A French* would have gone down with a dispassionate audience, certainly an idea book- up for Thanksgiving parties. As it is, *A French* failed to secure national distribution, and Crumb retreated from genre filmmaking to knock out a couple of uncorrupted indie studies. *Barth Proper* and *Never* (1975). Business remained poor: the films were stubborn sellers in an age where *Deep Throat* had swept the circuit six times. The two were apparently little more than "productions, a little patience for even the most intelligent viewer," Crumb wrote to ignore "Filmmaker and ex-Filmmaker Ray once walked out of a screening of *A French* at Lester's house." How's that for bad publicity?

BLOOD MANIA

Robert Vanezi O'Neil (1971)

Like Sergei Ginzburg's *Hunger for Terror*, this st.
deceptively delicious credits sequence, only to settle down
thoroughly dull and talky murder-chiller. There's barely
more than a few scenes other than a few examples
lighting and a blood-soaked death by conchagua. With
Blood Mama, though, you expect more than a few squar
act-up in an actress's hair. The story concerns Victoria M
sew it), who decides to bump off her rich, aging father
Nelson and help her boyfriend, David K... (Peter Carr)
out of a financial jam. Whups, the inheritance goes to Vi
ster Carl (Jack Peters) instead. Man, I wonder what's going
happen next? Well, you have to wait around long
out. Everyone talks too much. The whacked-out psyched
 soundtrack, as walking slowly but inevitably to grab an
onscreen, and the cameraman tries too hard to make the di
rector interesting by shooting from low angles and
...
... during the action. As noted, the plot is ...
ambitious but with a story this mediocre and predictable.
K... ..
Mama Buva film. Angel R... here playing a black
... .. appear in the
... ..
try making the secrets behindhand.

Volume 12, Number 1

BLOOD OF GHASTLY HORROR

ed Adamson (197)
 aka *Psycho A Go Go* (original title given to US Copyright Office,
of Terror (alternative title given upon submission of
 the *A Go Go* title to US Copyright Office)
 with the *Electrostatic Brain*
 with the *Synthetic Brain*

When is a horror film not a horror film? When it's a murky
 crime caper directed by A. Adamson, retitled for the squillionth time
 using hard-earned cash out of unsuspecting punters, some
 film may even have fallen for the same rubbish before
 deciding as sci-fi under the title *Man with the Synthetic Brain*
 has been its half-life in 1964 as *Two Tickets to Terror* and with
 participation of Sam Sherrman went through a number of
 titles that made it the shingles of the genre, irritating and hard to
 watch. Perhaps I should just laugh and sign up to the so-bad-
 it's-funny but really no. Tedious, dishonest, anachronistic, it's
 a terrible run-around that counts as a waste of your life. The
 man Sherrman (who else?) features Sherrman in Showman mode,
 crimes and playing the fool. He's a charmer, probably a
 bit of a guy, and by all accounts he was the power behind the throne
 of Adamson's movies, but I'll leave it to others to tell that story
 for me. Adamson's and Sherrman's efforts fail to make the grade in
 sorts of ways. They lack the demented, chaotic quality that
 makes films like *Boaring House* so compulsive: there are no
 intentional howlers like the ones that perk up Ed Wood's scripts
 but are neither squally enough to shock your inner pride, nor any
 enough to masturbate your inner aesthete, and the wedge of conven-
 tional action melodrama that frequently intrudes has a flattening
 effect on the trash-horror elements. Having watched four Adamson
 movies for this book, I find that I haven't smiled once, neither with
 nor at them. Consider myself a sucker for the siren call of
 bad film, but as Kim Newman put it in his book *Arguably: Movies*
 "Any man who thinks bad films are unprovocative fun would be cured
 fucked in a cinema during an all-night A. Adamson retrospective."
 Made in California
 also *Brain of Blood, Dracula vs. Frankenstein and Nurse Sherrman*

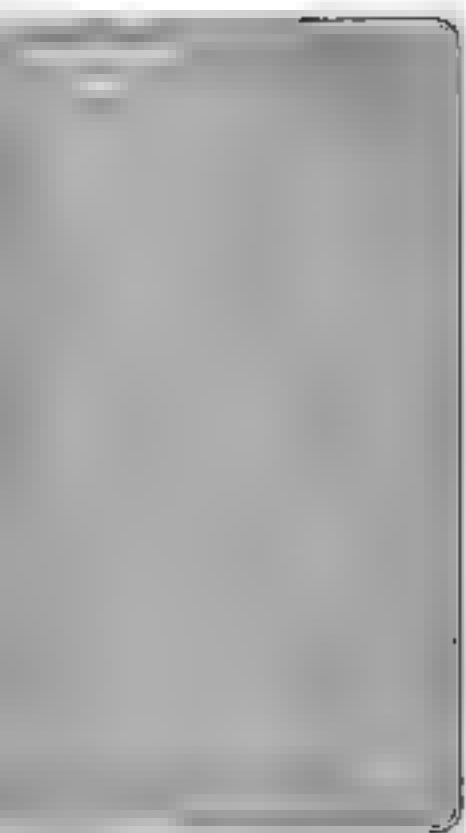


BLOOD ORGY OF THE SHE DEVILS

ed V. Mikelis (1972)
 aka *Female Psycho Society* (US Copyright Office)
 If you'd like a thorough trip through the wacky world of
 auteur polygamist Ted V. Mikelis, I recommend you track down a
 copy of the Re/Search book *Irreducibly Strange Films*, which
 provides an extensive interview and talks about his movies in
 detail. For the though, Mikelis is another director in the A1
 Adamson mould: his films suffer the same juddering adherence to
 an earlier period of movie-making that we see in Adamson's
Dracula vs. Frankenstein, or stray anachronisms like Charles
 Nazel's *The Possessed!* (A.G. Patterson's *Doctor Gore* and Jerry
 Warren's *Frankenstein Island*). *Blood Orgy of the She Devils* is a
 case in point. Static, fakey scenes are interspersed with painfully
 drawn-out 'occult rituals' performed by scantily clad women
 whose writhing is supposed to connote mystical sensuality but
 instead looks simply ludicrous. Mara, a witch queen living in a
 castle on the outskirts of Los Angeles (actually Mikelis's own
 home), offers a service designed to connect women with their
 experiences in a previous life: in each case it turns out they were
 once persecuted for witchcraft. The reincarnated witches
 grudgingly lend a hand in Mara's ceremonies, which climax in the
 sacrifice of a bound man. Mikelis's taste for strong women does
 at least add some colour to his narratives, but unlike Russ Meyer
 he's less thorough in pursuing the implications. The witch
 queen's plot is thwarted by three men, one an occult expert and
 one a Christian priest. So much for the awesome power of
 Woman; but then what do you expect from a man who lives with
 his own harem?
 Made in California
 also *The Corpse Grinders*

Reviews





Blood Sabbath



Blood

BLOOD SABBATH

Dianne Murphy (1972)

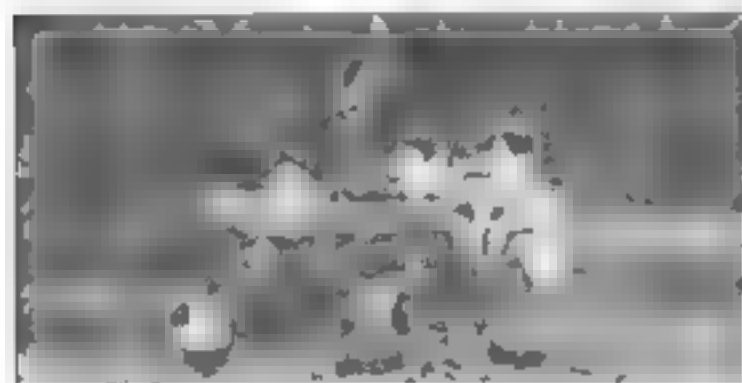
aka *Yyalah*

Drippy David (Anthony Geary) – allegedly a Vietnam veteran, but temperamentally more suited to sitting cross-legged in a field listening to Donovan – goes hiking through Mexico with his guitar. After a scary encounter with a troupe of naked lippy girls, he knocks himself out in a fit. He comes round to find a beautiful young woman called Yyalah (Susan Darnalie-Shaw) tending his wounds. Slipping back into unconsciousness, he wakes some time later to find Lonzo (Sam Gilman), an itinerant preacherman, standing over him. Lonzo warns David not to go looking for his ethereal new girl friend. It transpires that Yyalah is a water-nymph who belongs body and soul to the Priestess Aloia (Dyanne Thorne), who runs a witch-cult practising child sacrifice: an arrangement that the locals accept, to the horror of their local padre (Steve Cravers). David wants to stay with Yyalah, he must first sacrifice his soul, and Aloia is the only one who can perform the necessary ritual. But Aloia has her own reasons for helping David shuck off his spirit.

I enjoyed this a lot more than I was expecting to, but whatever possessed Dianne Murphy to cast Anthony Geary as the soldier? He looks as though he'd have trouble fighting off a persistent moth, never mind the Vietnam. *Blood Sabbath* draws much of its amusement alike from such misadventures – love the scene where a thoughtless David, keen to be united with Yyalah, asks a startled Catholic priest how to get rid of his soul. Even better is the later scene where David, now successfully rid of his soul, goes running through the woods, leaping and chattering and shouting. *I'm free, Yyalah!* It works because Geary is comically inept at showing joy, picking up fallen tree branches and shaking them emphatically, chucking handfuls of leaves in the air, and, in one priceless moment, swinging to a low-hanging branch and falling gracelessly on his ass. You don't get many pratfalls in witchcraft movies, and let's face it, if ever a subgenre needed a bit of slapstick... The *new* choice that makes perfect sense, however, is Dyanne Thorne, who brings her special brand of charismatic wickedness to the part of Witch-Queen Aloia. There's something about Thorne that lifts even the silliest of material, and although *Blood Sabbath* is refined behaviour as far as witchcraft tales are concerned, she herself is reason enough to watch it. She has a way of purring through dialogue that ensures you listen to every word. Thorne pushes useless Yyalah and dazy David out from centre-stage, with evil Aloia perversely likeable in their stead (as befits a story whose cartoon-like notions of good and evil are divorced from reality).

The red sap! in *Blood Sabbath* takes a while to flow, but it's worth waiting for a great surprise involving a severed head. Full-frontal nudity is frequent enough to raise a few eyebrows, but the sexual content is strictly of the writhing, humanized variety seen in films like *Blondie of the She Devils* and *Crypt of Dark Secrets*. *Blood Sabbath*, though, is head and shoulders above these examples, and if you simply *have* to watch an early seventies sexy witchcraft tale, this one's probably the mind film.

Director Dianne Murphy (aka Geraldine Brianne Murphy) was born in London in 1933, but moved to America after the war and embarked on a strikingly unconventional career, attending the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City, working at a rodeo, and performing as a clown for the Barnum & Bailey Circus. She eventually took a slightly more sedate job as a still photographer



Once a year, a virgin must DIE...!

BLOOD SABBATH

10

The nightmare half world between heaven and hell...



which took her to Hollywood, where she met and married low budget movie-maker Jerry Warren (see *Frankenstein Island*). In 1980 she became the first ever female director of photography on a major studio picture (*Fatal*, starring Liam Neeson) and has had several Emmy nominations (and one win) for cinematography. Presumably disenchanted with *Blood Sabbath*, Murphy's second and last film as director *To Die, To Sleep* (1994), is apparently a Christian-themed drama of sin and repentance. She died of cancer in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, on 20 August, 2007.

Made in California

BLOOD SUNDAY

Alan J. Levy (1982)

aka *Premortals* (original title)

aka *Dreadful Slaves*

Teenager Marion (Laurie Donnan Wilkes) is unhappy at home thanks to her ceaselessly bullying father, Frank (Richard Leech). Not content with having partially crippled her in a drunk-driving incident, he jealously polices her every move, and threatens her with violence if she continues to see her boyfriend Joey (William Kirby Cullen). Worse still, she's suffering bad dreams and visions about an escaped lunatic (Frankie Avalon) committing gruesome murders. Could the visions be linked to a blood transfusion received, from a patient at the State Mental Hospital?

If you're familiar with Avalon from his *Beach Party* film with Annette Funicello, or as a teen pop star contemporary of Fabian and Bobby Rydell, you'll probably do a double-take at the sight of the former Sultan of Surf slurring an axe into a man's face. If not, you'll simply consider his performance moderately acceptable, but wonder where he got a Bermuda can when he's supposed to have been incarcerated in a top security loopy-bun for twenty years. The best acting here comes from Richard Leech as the über-strict father, and Antoinette Bower as his despairing wife, Dianne. Donnan Wilkes, however, could do with a bit of tuition when it comes to the *de rigueur* sobbing and wailing.

It's just a bit of
fear for fear from



FRANKIE AVALON • DANE CLARK • NOELLE NORTH
WILLIAM KIRBY CULLEN • RICHARD JAECKEL

Shot in the Oregon coastal towns of Coos Bay, North Bend and Charleston, *Blood Song* at least has these attractive locations to credit. Sadly, the most interesting story angle — Marion's psychic link with the killer — is left undeveloped. The movie was originally titled *Premonitions*, but the psychic idea never goes anywhere, which is perhaps why the first title was eventually dropped. Really though, given that Avalon never sings a note, the film's greatest problem is the music: suspense is constantly undermined by synth-heavy score that bounces between irritating arpeggio basses and schmaltzy romantic interludes. Thanks to this musical patchwork, and some puzzling omissions in the narrative, the film's momentum is as stumbling as the lead character's gait. You have to be in a forgiving mood too, when Marion, having walked in on the killer hacking her father to death in the sitting room, runs outside and makes no attempt to rouse the neighbors, instead limping manically off to the deserted saw-mill at the end of the street. It's not even the middle of the night: Marion's mum is still at a PTA meeting. The saw-mill sequence is one of the highlights of the movie, but for a heroine with one leg in calipers to doggedly ignore the nearest source of help is the sort of weak plotting that hobbles reunions.

The fact that Marion's mother never reappears, even after police arrive to mop up her husband's butchered remains, is a clue to the film's behind-the-scenes problems. Although the sole directing credit in the start of the film goes to Alan J. Levy, the end credits mention additional scenes directed by Robert Angus, and with a different cinematographer, Irwin Goodnow, suggesting that the new scenes were filmed after the initial production wrapped (the first credited director Steve Posey, aka Stephen L. Posey, is a horror specialist at the time who helmed ten credits on *Blondie*, *Bratwurst*, *The Slender Fawn*, *Massacre*, and *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning*). A *Twilight* article called Director Shifts During Filming (3 September, 1986, p.32), listing productions where directors had been replaced for various reasons, mentions Levy and *Blood Song*. It would seem that after Levy finished his shoot, the producers asked editor Robert Angus — who has had some directing experience — to fill in.

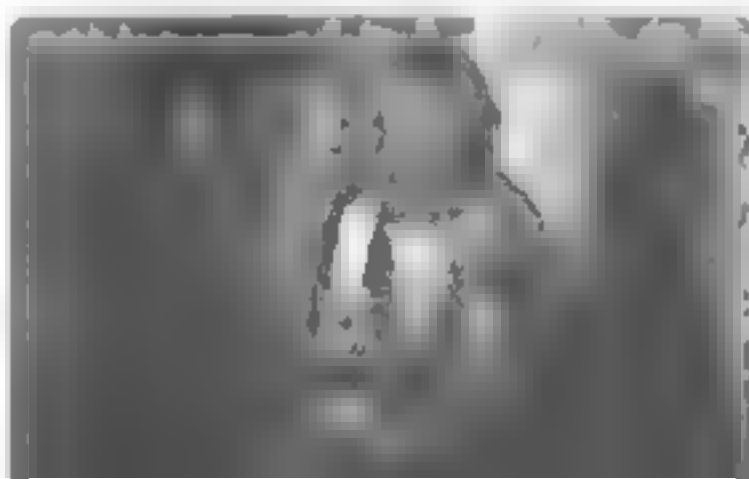


grab the necessary extra footage. The last few scenes with Marion being restrained and sedated by doctors, and later in bed, seen only in darkened profile, may have been filmed without Wilkes's involvement, and the aforementioned scene with the cops at Marion's house, which not only fails to show the father's dead body but also relegates the mother to a brief dialogue aside, also has the stamp of a scene shot later without the principals.

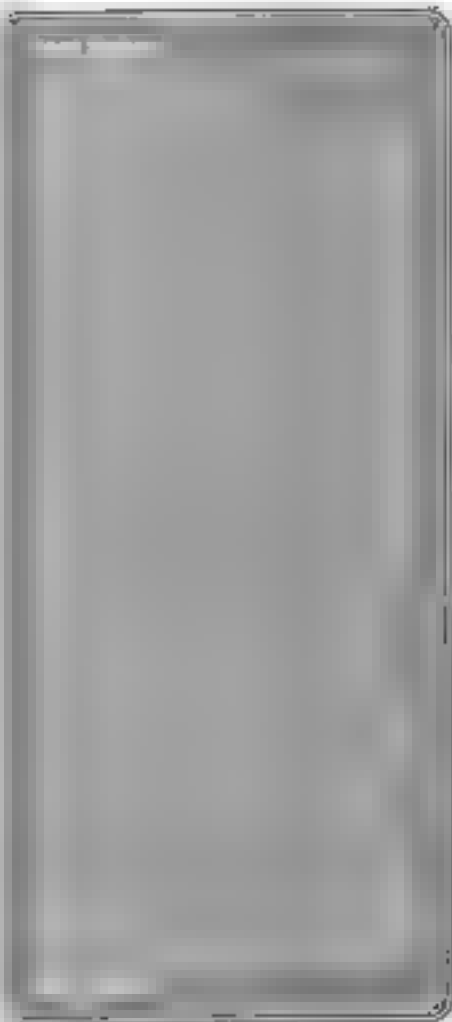
Robert Angus, the art director on the picture, told me "The director was Alan J. Levy, who was — and still is — one of the most successful directors of television, but somehow he thought this little item was his ticket to the big time. Knowing nothing about what makes horror scary, he went for more blood. In a fight to the death between Avalon and Jaeckel he just kept wanting me to pour more and more of it on poor long-suffering Jaeckel. He ended up looking like a squashed jelly donut." Presumably some of the excess dirt Angus describes was trimmed later, because what's left is actually the most powerful scene in the film, both for the plausibly nasty knife wounds Jaeckel receives, and for the emotional dynamic, which has the bad father redeem himself by giving his life to protect his daughter. In fact, without Jaeckel, a major film simply wouldn't work at all. If the psychic theme is tumbled, the lead actress is no good, and the soundtrack close to intolerable, Avalon's performance is okay, but it's not enough to hang a film on. Suppose, in the pandemonium of horror films starring pop singers, it's better than the Rebekah's *Blood Harvest* starring Tiny Tim, but it falls some way behind Pete Walker's *The Comeback*, with Jack Jones.

Television director Alan J. Levy began directing in high school, making over forty non-fiction films before he even got to college for groups like the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the National Safety Council. He moved to California in 1964, working for MGM as an assistant to the producer on the TV show *Nature's Fury*. He later went on to direct more than fifteen television "Miracles of the Week" and helmed numerous episodes of *Gunsmoke*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Arrested*, *Lids & Clark*, *ER*, *Baywatch*, *Empire State* and *Sanctuary* *Call of Duty*, among many others.

Made in Oregon.



Marion (Donna W.) prepares to face off the killer in *Blood Song*



30-40 "Local backwoods attitude (horror movie style) from an old garage attendant" seen in Blood Stalkers

50-60 Tom Crabtree, Jen Celea-Anne and Denise Miller reprise "There's something in the wood shed" Blood Stalkers



BLOODSTALKERS

Robert W. Morgan (1975)
 aka *Bloodstalkers*
 aka *The Night Dances Dico*

Terror awaits two couples heading for a restful vacation in a cabin set deep in the Florida Everglades. Despite the rural beauty their holiday becomes a nightmare that only one of them will survive. Will it be Mike (Jerry Albert), the Vietnam veteran, Mike's mistress, the overtly lovely Kim (Tom Crabtree), valiant theatrical Daniel (Dennis Miller), or his nervous wreck of a wife Jen (Celeste Anne Cole)? A surly garage attendant warns them to turn back, for they're about to enter *Blood Stalker* country: "inside, or survive out there overnight!" Paying no heed, and ignoring a trio of grumpy psychos who drop by the garage to check out the newcomers, the twosomes stubbornly head for the old wooden cabin once owned by Mike's parents. As they arrive, unearthly animal-like screams echo across the swamplands, a hulking creature darts through the undergrowth, huge muddy footprints appear on the car... just who - or what - are the Blood Stalkers?

Sounds pretty good, huh? Well, I'm afraid me and the guy who wrote the video cover have misled you: some *Blood Stalkers* like its set-up from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but wastes a decent first act and the creepy, run-down backwoods setting by withholding any actual mayhem until the last few minutes. The leads have little to recommend them, certainly nothing to justify spending so much time in their company. If you're like me, you tend to add up the available red meat in a tale such as this, and although a lead cast of four is a tough team, it could still have worked if the killings had been made to count. After all, four murders were sufficient for *Tobe Hooper*. Unfortunately, by crowding all the violence into the last five minutes, Morgan makes a truly insane genre miscalculation. As for the soundtrack, there were times when the use of music in *Blood Stalkers* had me clutching my head in dismay. It's unremarkable for the first half of the movie, but as things 'hot up', a deeply tasteless Gospel number takes over, ruining the atmosphere as surely as a Wayne Bell score played at a Revivalist baptism. The offending

cure plays over two key scenes in quick succession, the latter running for nearly five minutes of supposedly non-boring parallel monologues, involving an attack by a hairy humanoid creature and the hero's attempts to dash cross-country to the rescue. As bad decisions go, it's a humdinger, completely destroying the already flimsy tension. Finally, in a twist borrowed from *Scaphylopus*, the Blood Stalker turns out to be a local smuggler dressed in an ape skin to scare visitors from his stash of ill-gotten gains. Probably the least exciting of all possible explanations, and a perplexing one when you consider the following...

Robert W. Morgan was born in Ohio, in 1935. He was a partner in Creative Film & Sounds of Miami, Florida (which provided post-production facilities for *Blood Stalkers*) and worked with Florida-based director William Greffe as production assistant. Back in March of '95? Morgan was out hunting in Mason County, Washington when he encountered a creature he later came to identify as a Sasquatch, or Bigfoot. The experience led to a lifelong obsession. Morgan has appeared regularly on US TV shows to debate the existence of Bigfoot, and between '96? and '97?, after dropping out of highly paid work in the electronics industry, he mounted a number of expeditions to search for the elusive Forest Giants, as he prefers to call them. He drew on experiences for Lawrence Crowley's 1971 documentary film *Bigfoot: Man Or Bear?* (originally entitled *The Search for Bigfoot*). Morgan can be seen on-camera in the film, testifying his Bigfoot sighting and describing his numerous search expeditions. He also appeared on David Welper's TV documentary *Monsters: Mysteries Or Myths?* for the prestigious Smithsonian Series. In '97? Morgan co-founded the non-profit American Anthropological Research Foundation with his friend and attorney W. Ted Ermi, who appears as one of the townspeople in *Blood Stalkers*. He has continued searching the world for evidence of Forest Giants. Morgan was described by one source as, "The most successful and the most controversial tracker of Bigfoot" to query his success, given the stubborn lack of fully authenticated sightings, but Morgan's "controversial" status is based on his noble attempt to protect "whatever-it-is" from gun-happy... or simply wish to shoot the creature for personal glory. Morgan has successfully urged various territorial officials to create County Ordinances protecting Bigfoot from wanton slaying. In response Rene Dahinden, a Canadian researcher, angrily threatened "shoot Morgan if he ever comes between me and a Bigfoot" - whatever your feelings about the credibility of the phenomenon, Morgan is at least on the side of the angels. (On their side, but not yet living with them. The Internet Movie Database confuses Robert W. Morgan the filmmaker and Bigfoot expert with Robert W. Morgan the deceased Ohio DJ, who died of lung cancer '99? In '99, the former is still alive and was interviewed by Canadian broadcaster Rob McConnell for his paranormal-themed X Zone Radio, as recently as March 2007.)

Made in Florida

BOARDINGHOUSE

John Wintergate (1982)
 aka *Houseguest*
 aka *Bad Force*

A house where mysterious deaths have occurred is bought by Jim Royce (Hawk Adley aka Hank Adley aka John Wintergate), a Lutheran with psychic powers who proceeds to rent out pretty college girls. His plans for a harem are undone, however, by a malevolent force residing within...

You wouldn't guess from the synopsis above, but this is one of the weirdest films in this book, truly a one-of-a-kind experience. Some would say that's a good thing, we don't any more find like this in the world. However, I disagree. *Boardinghouse* is untinged in some wonderful, elusive way that defies criticism. The accumulation of events is so haphazard, the dialogue so off-the-wall, that you can watch this three times before sense begins to emerge. I know that, for me, the first

viewing was a riot of incomprehensible situations. I admit to being in an altered state at the time – but the film is tailor-made for such indulgences. A hallucinatory vibe positively radiates from the screen. I found my notes from this viewing worth drawing on here, because although I've now got a grip on the film (sort of), it's the first-time experience that matters most, so

[FLASHBACK] After a slow start with some strange goings-on at a hospital, a guy in an office, sitting in the lotus position back-starts the story by w/tpower alone. He's called Jim, he's played by the director, and he uses the power of his mind to make the potted plants shake – which is the first demonstration of cause and effect in the movie – or as Finstein would say, 'spooky action at a distance'. Just as you're getting the hang of it, a roaring drunk (Joel Riordan) staggers into the scene and disrupts everything. Back at the boarding house, carloads of girls are arriving. They look and sound like 'horror film victims' and for a while *BoardingHouse* feels as if it's going to settle down and get 'normal'. This turns out not to be the case, and we're soon back in Mr Wintergate's druggy disoriented mind-swamp. It's all strangely compulsive. The girls arrive in such numbers that it's subsequently hard to keep track of who's who, and what they mean to each other. They're a touch mechanical but they add a dash of vigour, and at least they *think* they're in a regular movie – despite the editing, camera and soundtrack conspiring to derail them. A supernatural force pushes a metal spike through one girl's hand. She screams, and her friends gather round to stare. "All her fingers I checked them," says Jim. He must be in robotics. A good thing he showed up, as the robo-girls are starting to break down how else could one of them take a shower without seeing a huge blossoming bloodstain on the wall? When finally she freaks, she

sees herself as a gargoyle in the mirror – the first of several surprisingly creepy images. Everything is very strange, and now the horror is piling up: a fellow called Richard (Brian Bruderlin) is electrocuted when a hairdrier jumps into the bathwater, gloved hands drag the body away. So far we have telekinesis, supernatural entities, and a gloved killer, each vying for attention. *BoardingHouse* has flaws alright, but it certainly isn't dull. A character called Victoria (Kassu) goes upstairs to steal a robe from Jim. He's in the bath, and says, "I'm not using cosmic energy so that I can learn the secrets of the universe." He demonstrates his power to Victoria by levitating the soap out of the bathwater and skimming it across the suds. "You must have just made it move with your brain?" she says. Downstairs, she makes a startling claim when the other girls ask if Jim came on to her: "He's not physical at all, he's too much of a metaphysics!" In the garden, the leather-clad gardener brandishes a hammer at someone we can't see. A skeleton hand reaches out and smotheres Victoria as she climbs into bed. It's one of the older girls, banging a scepter with a spoon. I think madness is entering my brain. From this maelstrom we enter a dream-sequence – a daring move for a film already so close to the edge. Who knows where the dream begins? Perhaps at the start of the cape? Rolling hands reach from the darkness, and Victoria takes to the garden where a terrifying thing, with a pig's head attacks her. Victoria goes to bed in a graveyard, but there's a corpse under the covers. She wakes up and screams – three loud, lingering tones at the same perfect pitch. Jim has some calming words for us, as we approach meltdown. "Everything's alright. Trust me. Everything is beautiful. And love is beautiful too." [FLASHBACK ENDS]

There's more, much more – but you need to see the film yourself without too many quotes to spoil it. Be assured, it just gets freakier. You could quote every line of dialogue, describe every scene and every cut, and still you wouldn't capture the freaked-out ambience of *BoardingHouse*. In a film where people say things like, "I cut myself with the apple – *in* the knife," what chance is there to make sense of things? Psychics battle each other in a demon-infested house, a woman develops paranormal abilities after being told, "Anyone can do it," people are dying but no-one seems to notice, and whole sections of the film ignore each other. There's something thrilling about its immaculate impenetrability.

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BoardingHouse is Frank Roach and Renee Harman's *Frozen Screens* taken even further. After a very slow and obstinate first fifteen minutes, the film begins to accelerate, with something weird happening, or ineffably bizarre being said, in every scene. For instance, Victoria sees some sort of demon, and has a fit. Two friends barge in and find her screaming her guts out, and one of them says, "Here, have some pizza." How do you deal with that? *How?* Horrible things keep happening, as the genre demands, but they're churning around in so much technical, perversity that there's no sense of development or accumulation. You could wonder the shots back to front and not seriously damage the overall experience – just as mathematicians had to invent 'imaginary numbers' like the square root of a minus figure to make certain calculations work, we need to invent an 'imaginary aesthetic' if a film like this is to yield its pleasures. And the keystone is pleasure, not 'making sense'. The confusion and car-crash plotting are essential to the fun. I don't know what to make of this film, I don't know what I'm supposed to think. I don't know where I am in relation to it, or within it. These feelings are exhilarating, and they happen in only two places: extreme art cinema and the weirdest shores of horror. *BoardingHouse*, like Dora Wishman's *A Night To Dismember* and the films of Renee Harman, feels like cinema from another dimension – so much is skewed, so many technical and structural flaws proliferate, that you're forced to take it as a new kind of viewing experience – it's cinema anti-matter, and as such, potentially 'dangerous' if you projected it onto Hitchcock's *Frenzy*, the two would annihilate each other in a flash of pure energy. Go ahead, try it! But don't say I didn't warn you.

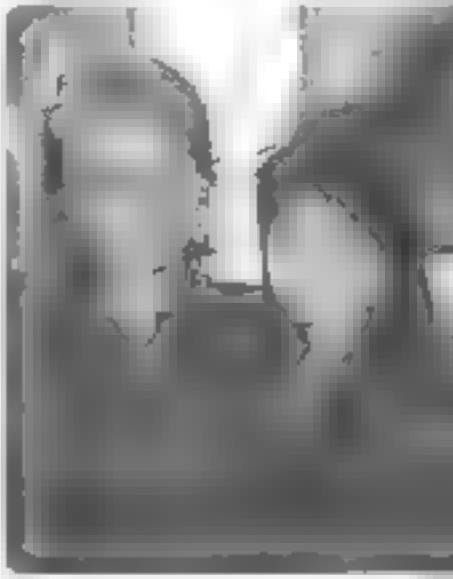
It's probably a good thing after all that there are so few films like *BoardingHouse* – we might get used to them, and never enjoy a coherent movie again. There's a great short story by Clark Ashton Smith, *A Star Change* (1933), in which a man's mind is altered by aliens so that he can experience their higher dimensional reality, which is fine until they dump him back on earth without reversing the process. He goes insane, unable to cope with a now monstrous and terrifying human reality. If only John Wintergate could adapt it into a feature.



BoardingHouse
artwork generated for this entry

Blood Stalkers never need
a close-up

Mark Adly (or is it Mark
Wintergate)
Kassu, star of BoardingHouse, looks scary





Director John Wintergate and star Katsasu, on the making of *Boarding House*

"I read your Boarding House piece and we could not stop laughing. You seem to have caught the gist of what we mean to portray. We intend it to be a sort of cult oriented, far out, over the top tongue & cheek, outrageous and insane comic spoof on the horror film genre. Your understanding of it is great, marvelous and very, very funny. Hey, you might have inspired us to do a sequel Boarding House 2: The Next Generation. Who knows, it might be great fun, we'll just have to find the money to do it. You asked about other projects, the last one we did was a family type movie based on a true story called Sally & Jess. We stopped the release when our friend who was a relatively honest distributor died."

"It was finished and the three new distributors contacted seemed to get ready to shift us into black market territory in the Orient, Middle East & South America."

"I was told by someone who informed us, so we pulled the picture each time. We are still looking to distribute it, it's our hands off movie. Katsasu and I have been in the business for more than thirty three years. We have been in the entertainment field, acting, writing, directing as well as music most of our lives. We make a pretty comic spoof about horror films, so Katsasu and I thought about the most unlikely scenario to present it and make it over the top childish and weird. Since we had limited funds, we decided to be innovative and do it in video format, due to the very high cost of the film. As you know with film you don't want to waste money on a picture in retakes because it gets very expensive. So we knew it might take many takes to get the right weird off the walls flavor to the scenes, we decided to be daring and be the first to do an entire film project in video format. The video editing in some ways was easier in a physical aspect, but the sheer volume of takes made it quite challenging to pick out the most suitable ones. Katsasu and I had quite a few different opinions from our distributor. We also did all the special effects, ha ha, effects and had a great time playing with them in different ways."

"We asked a few of our fellow acting friends to work with us. It all happen, and it was quite a challenge to have some of them come off the way they did, but we all had fun working on the project. We did use a few of the accidents that happened throughout the filming when they were really strange or came off even more or stupid-feeling. The metaphysical aspect in the film was meant to give it a deeper scope somehow and also make it more emotionally intense as well as a bit more crazy & odd as it is. I love the metaphysical and spiritual aspect of life. It seemed like a strange but good and extra ingredient for the film."

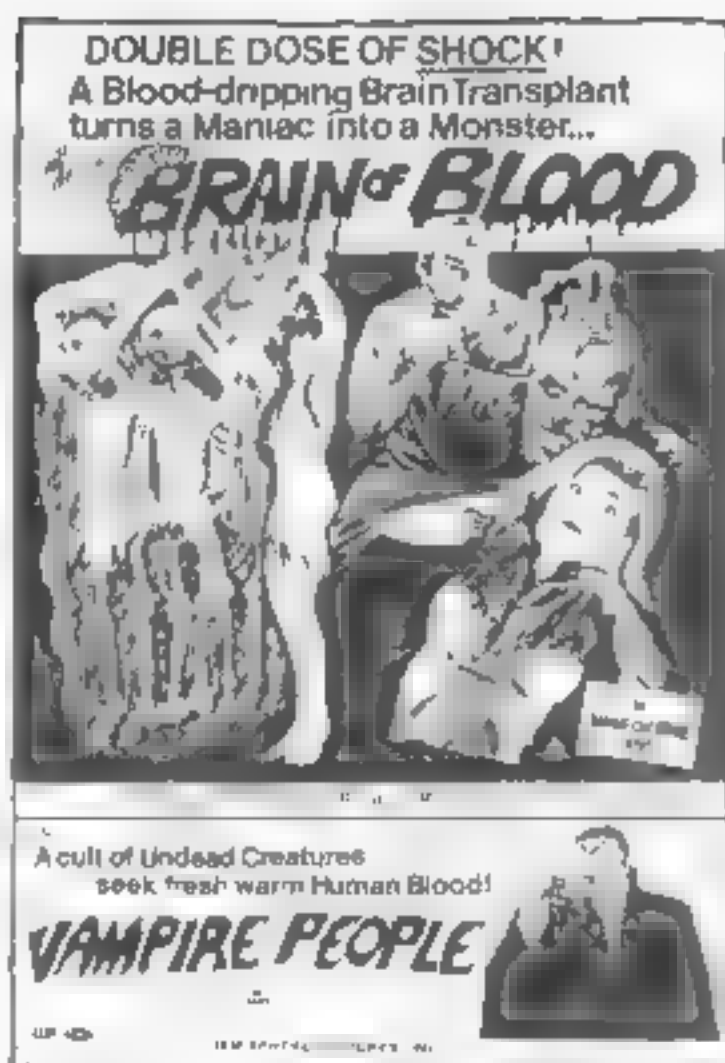
"I was involved in the editing of the script along with the computer typing which at the time was pretty strange. Lots of laughter, fun pranking and lots of playful pranks and mischief. When we opted to transfer the movie to film later on, it was quite an interesting decision and a relatively new process and did not turn out quite well as we had hoped, but we thought it was good enough for an innovative cult type film and the distributor agreed and released it alongside low budget if we remember correctly."

Made In California

BRAIN OF BLOOD

aka Adamson (1971)
aka Brain Damage (US video title)
aka The Brain
aka The Creature's Brain
aka The Lurching Brain

On the principle that if you've got nothing nice to say, you shouldn't say anything at all, I really ought not to review Adamson's movies, as there's not a single one that I like. It's with a weary heart that I decided I ought to at least briefly touch on his horror output, so forgive me, I'll keep it brief. For the record, *Brain of Blood* has a gory brain transplant, sinister Arabo-hokey mind control, inept car chases, a mad scientist and his dwarf companion, a laboratory full of bubbling vials, a cellar



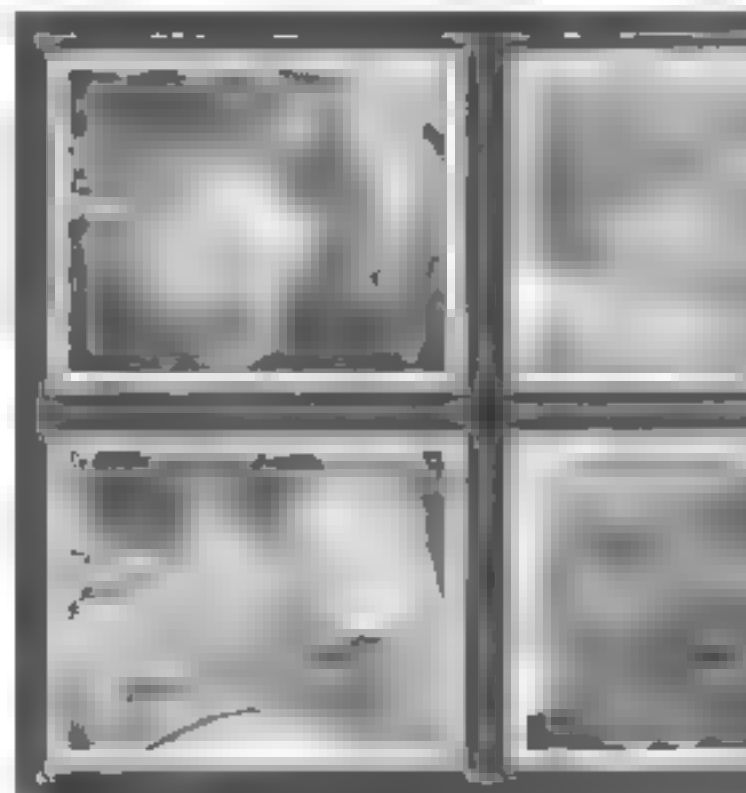
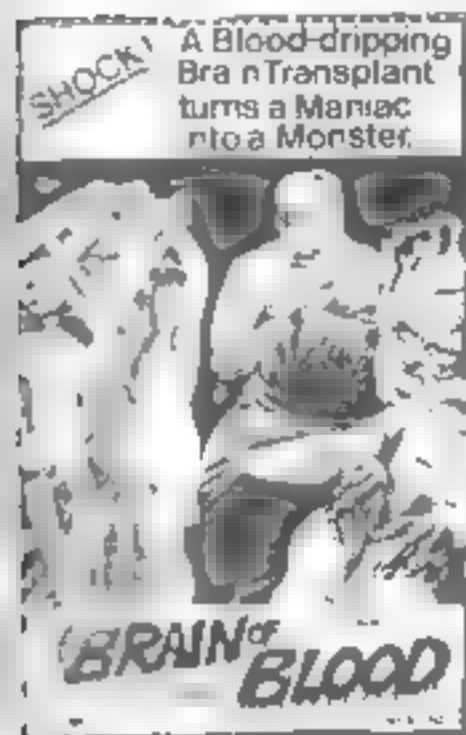
where screaming girls have the blood drained from their bodies and the chance to see more of Zandor Yorkov (the screen's wilds Count Dracula). I, this sounds like heaven to you, well, then go knock yourself out. For me, this plodding retro-horror is charmless, muddled and oh-so-boring. Adamson made a career of piggy-backing horror movies from the thirties, forties and fifties, bolting them all together without a spark of ingenuity, and stranding the viewer somewhere between faded pastiche and heavy nostalgia. Reading through his work is like crossing a slurry-pit full of dead or dying offshoots of bygone genre cinema. You just let the cadavers rot in peace.

Made In California

see also: *Blood of Chastity Horror, Dracula vs. Frankenstein*

Yours Truly

from Al Adamson's *Brain of Blood* the top right shows the same scene with the similarly creepy score movie *The Vampire People*





interns. Dashbacks alone the way. Technically, Favorite is total uninspired: shots are held for too long, the camera merely observes and never explores, and nothing in his arsenal aids the performers. The effects are rudimentary too: despite warning that to interrupt a black magic ceremony disturbs the delicate balance between evil and evil, the most terrifying manifestation we see is a pot bubbling with dry ice, some camera lens flare, and a ginger-haired mutant in a cape. There's a very explicit and drawn-out injection scene that could perhaps give the squeamish a hard time, but *The Brides Wore Blood* is really For Compleatists Only. Filmed in Jacksonville, Florida. Note: some sources refer to the late Bob Favorite, but I've been unable to confirm his death.

Made in Florida

CARNIVAL OF BLOOD

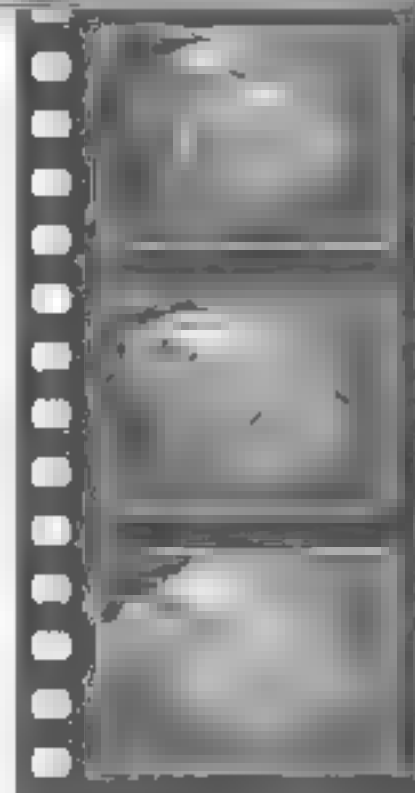
Leonard Kirtman (1970)

There's a maniac on the loose at the Coney Island fair, and when you meet his victims you'll be rooting for him as the names, distinct from the Dan Martin (Joseph) drags his girlfriend Laura (Judith Resnick) to the carnival to investigate the decapitation of Claire (Linda Kurtz), shrewish wife of Harry (William Orin). Laura hears noises under the boardwalk, and when she and Dan check it out, they find the eviscerated body of a hooker. Later, some broad has her eyes pulled out, and, not being callous, she's *that* important to the plot. The suspects are our Top Earle (Edgerly), holding mild-mannered John (John) of the shooting target, and 'Gumpy' (John Harris) (John Young), his scarred and hunchbacked servant. Wanna play Guess the Psycho?

Boy, this is hard work. Right from the opening scenes, following Harry and his harpy of a wife round the carnival, you feel as though you're being punished for heinous sins in a previous life. It's seventeen minutes before Harry and Claire are banished from the screen—the decapitated in the ghost-train, he eternally

WIZARD

A HORRIFYING CREEP SHOW!



The vampire (Chuck Fahl) is executed by the sunlight in the Fonda-styled scene. *The Brides Wore Blood*

Movie night: *The Brides Wore Blood*

Yvonne (Dolores Heiser) in a scene from *The Brides Wore Blood*

Smister rivalry with

WIZARD

JK video cover for *Carnival of Blood*

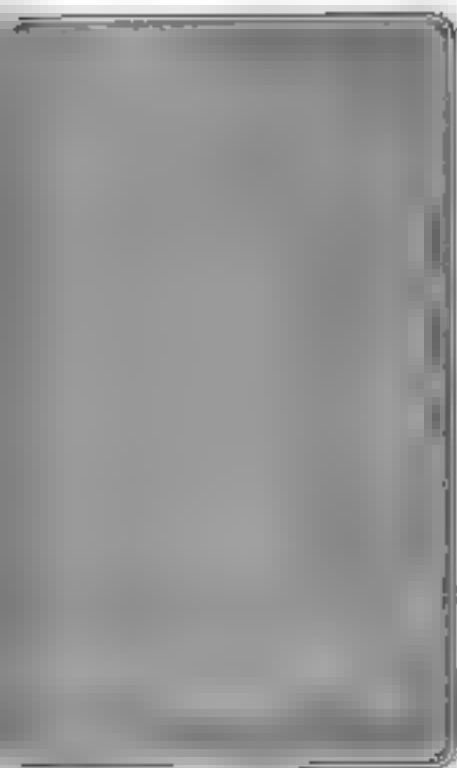
THE BRIDES WORE BLOOD

Robert R. Favorite (1972)

Long ago, the De Lorea family brought a curse upon themselves by dabbling in black magic. Subsequently, the men of the family have turned into vampires and slain their brides. It's up to Juan De Lorea (Chuck Fahlner), his niece Carlos (Paul Everett), and their retarded servant Perro (Bob Leizer) to lift the curse, but this by necessity involved taking a bride in, in the process, after which family friend Madame Von Kurtz will

raise the bride. Perro is sent out to invite four young women (Laura (Jan Sherman), Yvonne (Dolores Heiser), Vickie (Rita Hallard) and Dana (Dolores Starling)) to visit the grand De Lorea house, where they are unwittingly 'conditioned' for the role of unwilling mother. Juan opts for Laura, but her boyfriend (Ray Ben Robinson) gets wind of what's happening and interrupts the nuptial ceremony before it can be completed. Perro is possessed by a demon spirit and turns into a monster, slugging a machete into Ray's head and strangling Laura. Dana becomes a vampire, and Vickie has her throat slashed. Juan decides to make the best of it and rapes Yvonne. The family keep her locked up in the house to wait the birth of her child.

In order to make sense of this story, I've basically ignored the first five minutes. A young man in bed with his girlfriend discovers a hidden cubby-hole in the bedside wall. Inside is a diary written by Carlos De Lorea. "Who's Carlos De Lorea?" asks the girl. "He's my great uncle," the young man replies. "He raised my father and helped raise me until his death about two years ago. For some reason my great grandfather threw him out of the house and came back when his brother died and helped raise his nephew Juan De Lorea, who was my father. You get it that?" Well, since the speaker is supposedly the son of a man who turns out to have been killed, and whose only child was killed too, it's a mystery who the hell he really is. He's never even named. He finds the diary in the opening minutes, the contents of which are a giant movie-length flashback, but we never return to him! The fact that neither he nor his girlfriend are credited merely proves what a catchpenney effort this is. The seemingly arbitrary Spanish element, complete with flamenco guitar on the soundtrack, merely makes you pine for the more enthralling Iberian nonsense of *Carmen Dracula's Great Love* (Javier Aguirre, 1977) and *Werewolf's Shadow* (Leon Klimovsky, 1970). Somehow, although the story could easily provide the basis for a decent Gothic vampire tale, *The Brides Wore Blood* fails to live up to its title. The actors lack confidence, ensemble dialogue scenes hiccup with hesitations and nervous stances off-camera, and the story is structured disastrously. If your tale is told in flashback, it's really not a good idea to include



This decidedly camp grizzly bear adorns the
 cover of *Claws*, one of two different
 versions: this one from Shastbury Films
 in 1970
 is the cover
 of the 1977 *Claws* *Home*! The back cover
 features a double-page
 spread with several humans at horrific
 death, a professional animal catching team
 try their luck with our grizzly friend



grateful – but by then the damage has been done. It would take a miracle to turn this baby round, and Kirman is no Paul McKenna. Instead, tedious Dan and bland Laura patiently wade us through the same familiar stalls we visited with Claire and Harry: the shooting range, the palmist, the ghost-tram. By the time Laura has daringly added the Ferris wheel to the list, in the company of the killer no less, even the Junior Clowns would be baying for her blood. At the risk of repeating myself – only that thought had occurred to Kirman!, I honestly don't think you can say you've known boredom until you've sat through this movie without a remote control. Sold on DVD by Something Weird as "a strange little *suck*" and, in the splatter style of Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Carnival of Blood*, gives even the laziest of Lewis (*Color Me Blood Red*) the lustre of a Dario Argento film. Admittedly, both gore scenes are in the same funny/clumsy vein as Lewis – but they're over too quickly, and the photography (at least as presented on DVD) is so abysmal there's barely a chance to see what's going on. It makes you realise how clever Lewis was to fight his dime-store grue with the flashbulb glare of a paparazzi doorstepper.

Leonard Kirman made one more horror flick, *Curse of the Headless Horseman*, before doing the decent thing and moving over to porno as 'Leo De Leon' and 'Leon Cucci'. As John Kirkland, he was lighting director and Second Unit director on Eric Jefferey Harris's *The Devil and a Hide Portfolio*, and redeemed himself by producing films for porno's uber-shock merchants Zehedy Cohn: *Sex Work*, *The Affairs of Janice*, *Unwilling Lovers* and *The Devil Inside Her*. Most of the rest of the cast and crew seem to have packed up and left the movie-business without trying again, although Earle Edgerton went up in the world a few years later in Andy Milligan's *Fleshpot on 42nd Street*. Perhaps the most shame-faced participant here is Burt Young (created as John Harris), who went on to appear in the *Rocky* films and made a memorably ex-patriate in Dainiano Dainiani's superior horror sequel, *Amityville II: The Possession*.

Made in New York City
 also: *Curse of the Headless Horseman*



THE CENTERFOLD GIRLS

John Pevsey (1974)
 See interview with John Pevsey

Made in California

THE CHILD

Robert Voskanian (1976)
 See interview with Robert Voskanian and Robert Dudashian
 Made in California

CLAWS

Richard Rushchick and Robert E. Pierson (1977)
 aka *Devil Bear*
 aka *Bear Truth*
 Jason Monroe (Jason Evers) leads a bunch of macho types up into the Alaskan Rockies, in pursuit of the giant grizzly bear that mauled his son during a boy scout expedition. Monroe's Indian tracker believes the bear is possessed by a supernatural power and Monroe is convinced it can think. As the harsh elements and the cunning grizzly pick off the quartet of hunters, it seems Monroe will have to face the beast alone.

This is a serviceable afternoon adventure film with one fair foot in the horror genre: thanks to some goring of victims and the emphasis on the Indian's supernatural visions of 'Warning Visions' foretelling his doom, visions which the film backs up as genuine. The grizzly's attack on a boy-scout camp is stunning, for sure, and slightly bloodier than you might expect, but this remains an adventure movie with horror elements, rather than the other way round. I confess I'm including it here mainly because it happens to have been shot in Alaska. Juneau to be precise. Evers travelled the other end of the country (Miami, Florida) later the same year to star in *Buttrick* for Wayne Crawford and Harry Kernin.

Made in Alaska

THE CORPSE GRINDERS

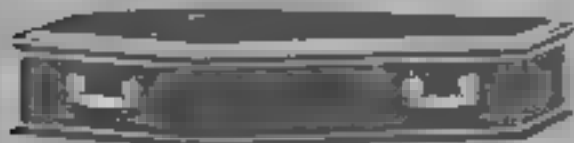
Teo V. Mikels (1971)
 Caleb Warren Bell and his wife Cleo Ann Noble supply corpses from the local cemetery to Landau (Stanford Mitchell), a cat-food manufacturer, who puts the bodies, shreds and all, into his meat-grinding machine. Landau hit on the idea after using the grinder to get rid of a troublesome business associate (Ray Dinnis), and when sales of the adulterated cat food increased, he turned to grave-robbing to keep up with demand. However, the product has unfortunate side-effects: domestic cats are now developing a taste for human flesh. When a cat belonging to Nurse Angie Robinson (Monika Kelly) attacks her boyfriend Doctor Howard (Cliff 'Sean' Kenney), and a dead woman whose leg been ripped out by an enraged feline is dropped off at the hospital, Howard puts two and two together, and with Nurse Angie in tow sets off in search of the culprit.

I've been pretty unforgiving in this book about horror films that mimic the styles of earlier decades, but *The Corpse Grinders* has an essential authenticity and cynicism that rescues it. Although the stock-che soundtrack could just as easily have Monogram cheapie from the forties, there's a grubby, ghoulst kick to the proceedings, with its bundled-up cadavers, low interiors and hair-triggered, explosive characters. Although the story is silly beyond the reach of sarcasm, there's a pulp grooviness to the film that's weirdly charming. The decidedly shaky 'cat-grinding machine' (which sadly is only referred to as such in the film's bonkers trailer) has an ultra-cheap, school-project vibe admitting fully-clothed humans at one end and discharging skeggy mince meat at the other, a process that continues to be both hilarious and revolting. There's also something compelling about the film's cramped *mise en scene*, with everything shot in tight, cluttered compositions, and with so little actual movement from scene to scene that you could imagine it all fitting inside a



the CORPSE GRINDERS

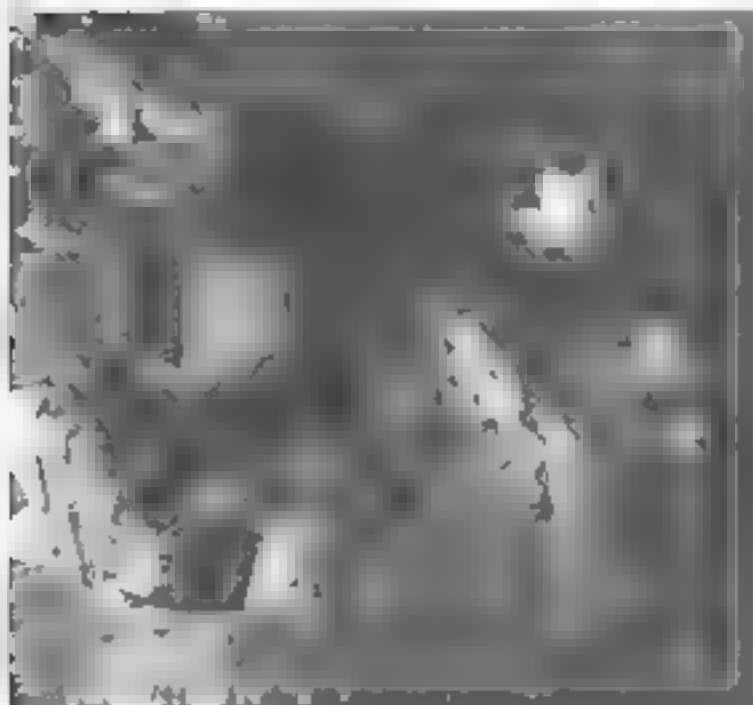
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know-shaker (now there's a marketing idea). The characters too (including a mentally subnormal woman who clings to a doll, and a deaf woman (Druella Hoy) who acts like your anorexic sister) add to the general air of dysfunction. Freakiest of all, Warren Oates as Caleb is a dyed-in-the wool who looks like he'd be happy abducting hitch hikers and torturing them in a soundproof bunker if the acting career went downhill. All of this without a story about flesh-eating cuts on the rampage makes the result irresistible. Mikels is not one of my favourite directors but this shabby, creaky piece of work is a masterpiece of kino-bizarre.

The Corpse Grinders was written by Joseph Cranston (*The Long Hand*, 1953), and Arch Hall Sr. (director of *Elgin* 1962). Mikels later directed a short-on-video sequel, *The Corpse Grinders 2* (2000), following it with *Mark of the Astro-Zombies* (2002). You check 'em out, don't think I dare.

Made in California
see also *Blood Orgy of the She Devils*



THE CRATER LAKE MONSTER

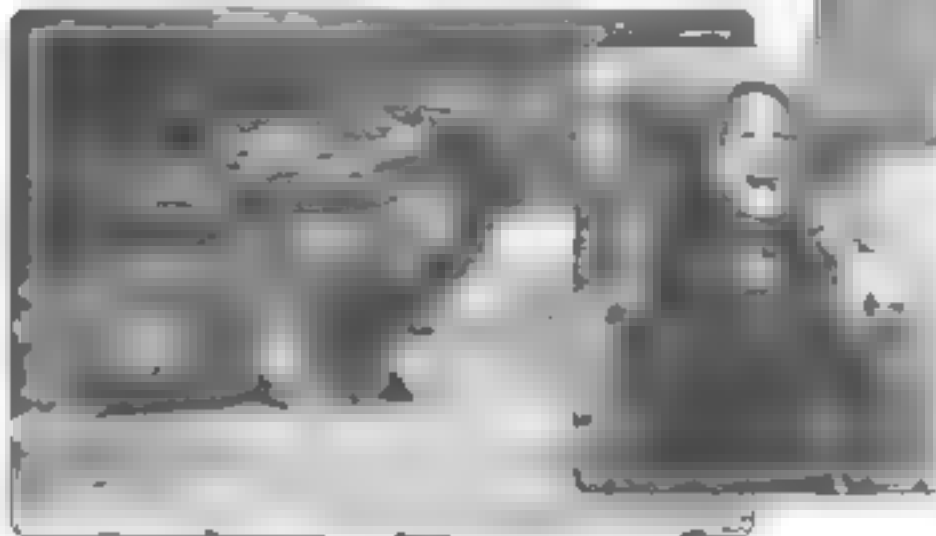
William R. Stromberg, 1977

A cop and a doctor discover cave paintings down a mine near Crater Lake, depicting primitive man holding a plesiosaur – proof that dinosaurs survived much later than believed. A meteor lands in the prophetically named Crater Lake, heating up the water and thus hatching a dinosaur egg that's lain in the silt for centuries. A water-dwelling plesiosaur then takes to the land (!!) and kills a hitch hiker, a bull and a fisherman in short order, before the action slows to a crawl and the viewer's mind clouds over.

I've been stuffing my shoes with newspaper so long my feet know more about what's going on than my head! This quip aside, the majority of *The Crater Lake Monster* (another minor addition to the roll-call of seventies monster-movies, is a chore to sit through. Its combination of low-budget humor, absurdistic plotting and occasional bursts of enthusiastic stop-motion animation may charm fans of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), but even hardcore plasticine addicts will be struggling more than usual between bouts of monster mayhem. The creature's scale varies wildly depending on which prop version we see, but at least Stromberg shows plenty of the beast – and right from the off too. There's an indie actual story though that he opts to waste a few long minutes on a comedy brawl between two good ole boys, who slug it out in the shallows of Crater Lake until finally, think that, they stumble on a floating corpse. In case you were unsure of how to take their drunken antics, they're helpfully signposted as comedies by the brightly chuckling score. An out-of-nowhere sequence involving a man who holds up a liquor store, shooting dead the assistant and a customer, reels cut in from a different movie. This actor gives the only compelling performance in the film. However Stromberg has the man drive his car off a cliff and into the maw of the monster (or rather into jump-cut proximity with a shot of the monster's thrashing jaws – a must see for connoisseurs of 'Will that do?' filmmaking). To give you some idea of the film's pacing problems, the generic scene where cops, the local doctor and the local couple gather to discuss what to do takes place around the seventy minutes mark. At which late point, at that moment is for the locals to duke it out with the plesiosaur using a bulldozer – a scene that reminded me of Sigmund Weaver built-ing the Mother in *Howl* with out for that lawsuit James Cameron.

Shot at Huntington Lake and Palomar Mountain, California *The Crater Lake Monster* boasts several future luminaries of special effects cinema. Actor Michael Tetter worked as digital artist on *Spider-Man 2*; fellow star Mark Siegel was creature maker on *Dam* and *Naked Lunch*; cinematographer Paul Gentry was visual effects supervisor on the hit TV series *24*; Jon Berg worked as a stop-motion effects man on *Sin City* the same year he built the miniatures for *Crater Lake*. Rustal Crook designed the monster in Larry Cohen's *Q: The Winged Serpent*, and worked on the stop-motion climax of Carpenter's *The Thing* before joining the effects crew of the first *Alien*. *Lord of the Rings* films, and Jon Danforth and Dave Allen's combined credits are too numerous to mention here. Perhaps most impressive of all, Phil Tippett went from building *The Crater Lake Monster*'s miniatures to the post of 'dinosaur supervisor' on *Jurassic Park*.

Made in California



The Corpse Grinders

The Crater Lake Monster



CRAZED

Richard Cassidy (1977) re-

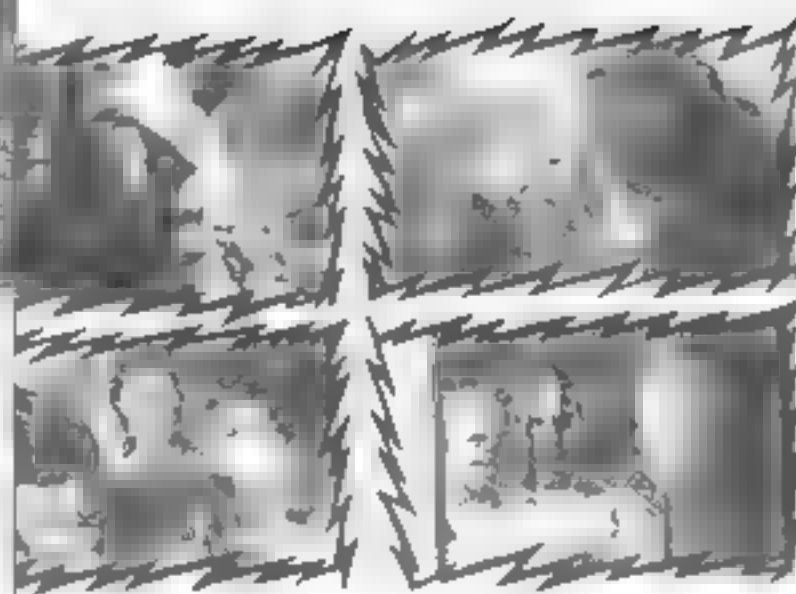
aka *Slipping Into Darkness*

aka *The Paramount*

aka *Blindfold*

Leslie Papas is Graham, the Norman Bates figure in this average knock-off of *Psycho*. Sexually abused by his father (dubbed "Graham" by his mother and then abandoned in a children's home by both of them), Graham grows up a quiet but emotionally disturbed young man. Having spent unhappy years in the Army, he's now settling down at a boarding house run by Mrs. Brewer (Belle Mitchell), an eccentric old lady who assumes a motherly role in his life. Into this situation comes Karen (Beverly Ross), a young woman seeking a new life away from her abusive husband. Graham falls for the new arrival, but all is bound to go wrong.

Crazed is basically too slow, but it's fairly well acted by Papas and Ross. Belle Mitchell, as the old lady, is a touch off-kilter, but her eccentricity survives a few clumsy line readings. On the violence front, there's one nasty stabbing scene and a strong leg, but little else to trouble the squeamish. The emphasis is on mood, and although the story is predictable (save for a decent twist about halfway), I found myself gripped as the old lady finally tumbles to the sickness of her favourite lodger. Cassidy's direction is rather staid, lacking for instance the ambition to visualise the madness of the unhappy Jean. Perhaps the main problem is that there are just too few unusual touches to distinguish it from the many other scraps of this kind (Curtis Harrington's *The Killing Kind*, Jenny Harris's *The Silent Screams*, or David Schmoeller's *CarnalSpace* for instance). Enjoyable as you watch it, *Crazed* nonetheless slips all too easily out of your mind afterwards and merges into the crowd of post-*Psycho* horror thrillers. Husband-and-wife team Richard and Jean Cassidy conceived the film together, and in order to drum up interest in the project they initially filmed it as a 35mm short. The film's grip, Dan Zarlenga, recalls that their "beautiful low project was an obvious tribute to the suspense and magic of *A Freud Melodrama*. Directed by Richard, it featured his wife Jean as the murder victim." Zarlenga also confirms that the original working



title of the film was *The Paramount* and that it was completed and released as *Slipping Into Darkness* by Jupiter Pictures in late 1979. The house featured in the film apparently still stands on Edgewood south of Wilshire Blvd., a few blocks east of Highland Avenue in Hollywood. Cassidy is sometimes confused with an Australian director of the same name.

Made in California.

1st CRAZIES

George Romero (1973)

aka *Love Train Trisac*

aka *The Mad People* (original script title)

After the hit-to-see masterpiece *There's Always a Woman* and the flagrant commercial flop *Season of the Witch*, *The Crazies* sees George Romero rediscover the commercial savvy that propelled his debut, *Night of the Living Dead*, while taking on the thread of ambition that would characterize his later films. It offers a nightmare vision of chaos surrounding America's first biological weapons spill, and it's so utterly convincing that only blind patriots, or optimists of the feeblest variety, would find it implausible. Everything goes wrong, technology interferes with the process of communication (a recurring Romero motif), bureaucracy and human error combine into gridlock, and the rub between authoritarianism and individualism puts a spark to tinder to a point where, dramatically speaking, you barely show the effects of the weapon spill. The fact that the infected go crazy is more a bitter irony than a pivotal plot point.

Romero develops the confusion without the film being confusing (it's packing an emotional punch that transcends sometimes overstretched acting skills of the cast). And that's the downside: of all Romero's major films, this is probably the least well served in the acting department. The central group of David (Will MacMillan), Andy (Lane Carroll), Hank (Harold Wayne Jones), Arnie (Richard Liberty) and Kathy (Lynn Lowry) lack the fine characterization that distinguishes Romero's subsequent film *Night of the Living Dead*, and more pertinently, his action-horror masterpiece *Day of the Dead*. MacMillan and Carroll are serviceable, nothing more. Jones (a David-less look-alike) is a bit better, providing a dry run for Scott Reiniger's character in *Day of the Dead*, while Richard Liberty (Dr. Frankenstein, Logan in *Day of the Dead*) is a valuable asset to the last reel, when his mindless, but intelligent, perversion. The exception is Lynn Lowry, who essays another of her spaced-out child-woman roles with great sensitivity (see also *I Drink Your Blood* and *Shivers*). The best performance, though, comes from Richard France as Dr. Watts, the scientist sent on a chillingly believable bureaucratic blunder into the massive danger zone, despite being of vital importance in the search for an antidote. Romero must have liked Richard France's style: he used the actor's blustering, bear-like persona in *Day of the Dead*, as the pundit whose brutal pragmatism alienates low experts during a rapidly collapsing TV debate. Here



France brings a touch of humor to the role of Dr. Watts that nonetheless strikes me as appropriate, his manner that of a high-handed private surgeon. Despite his arrogance, Watts emerges as a paternalist hero, but this being the 1970s, when heroism was extremely unlikely to flourish in the horror genre, all does not go according to plan. The scene where Watts is mistaken for a crazy by gas-masked soldiers, who herd him into an enclosure with the infected, neatly encapsulates the film's message: future of communication screws us all.

In contrast to Romero's signature zombie movies, bloodshed in *The Crazies* is mostly restricted to bullet-ho squibs. There are gaping flesh wounds or creative disembowements, but none as far as the most violent assault is on the audience, thanks to the aggressive sound-mix. The predominant musical element throughout is a rattling military snare drum, to which Romero adds sirens, blaring loudspeaker announcements, crackling radio-sets, near-constant gunfire, muffled yelling from gas-masked soldiers, the roar of motor vehicle engines, in short cacophony. It gives the film a jagged, painful quality, something that is not in the least helped by some very tinny sound-recording. As masked soldiers argue or discuss their orders with each other, Romero chooses to dub their voices in an echoey, highly artificial way, always blatantly studio-recorded despite the many naturalistic scenes set outdoors. This adds to the sense of dislocation between the soldiers and the rest of the cast, but further amplifies the headachy tension of the film. *The Crazies* is like waking outdoors in the morning with a hangover and having sunlight bounce off a car bonnet into your eyes. If it weren't for the quality of the storytelling, it would still be a bit too much. Flaws aside, however, this is a ferociously intelligent and compelling film made by a very talented director about to hit his peak.

Made in Pennsylvania.
See also: *Martin*



CREATORS FROM BLACK LAKE

Joe N. Houck Jr. (1976)
aka *Demons of the Lake* (US title)
aka *Attack at Black Lake*

Two Yankee students visit the Louisiana swamps to research stories of a giant bipedal anthropoid—that's Bigfoot, to you and me. First they get themselves into trouble with the locals, and then with a hulking creature that stalks them in the woods after dark.

A alcoholic through-insubstantial affair, this, not to mince words, could have done with a bit more monster mayhem. Despite some fairly effective scenes of tension there are no onscreen deaths, and even for a family-oriented drive-in feature it's just too gentle. Obviously Houck, a cinema entrepreneur well-acquainted with his potential audience, was aiming for a lighter 'PG' level score movie: the young male leads avoid swearing entirely and their attempted courtship of two 'hospitable' Southern girls is discretely curtailed by the arrival of the creature. However, considering that *Blood and Guts*, released around the same time and featuring several fairly graphic hammer murders, received a 'PG' too, Houck appears to have erred a little too far on the side of caution.

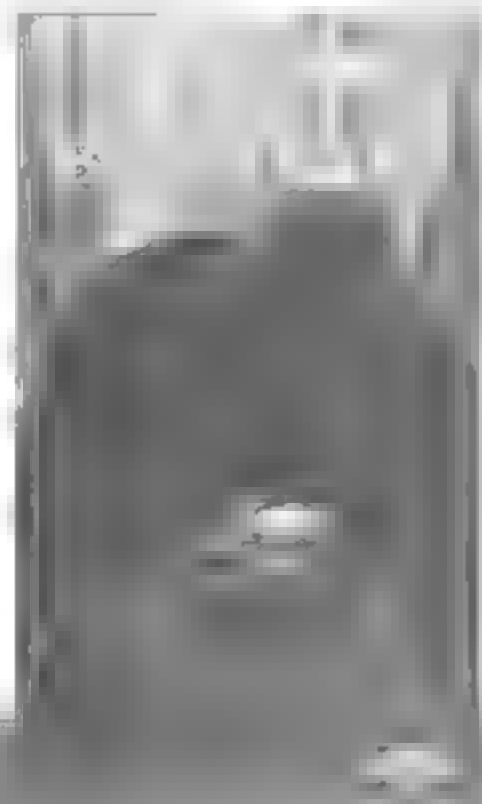
Despite a respectable looking ape-suit for the creature, and the presence of Dean Cain (*Star Trek*)'s under at the camera, the film is it wastes its visual possibilities. Bigfoot may be an oral tradition, with sightings passed around as folk stories and local gossip, but it seems a perverse use of the medium to spend more time looking at people talking about Bigfoot than actually showing the thing. There are several scenes where people recount tales of the creature, but only a few of these cross-fade into visual depictions. Perhaps Houck's intention was to approach things in the style of a campfire story, a round-the-log-fire country tale, but if it's a shame there's not more emphasis on visual storytelling, except for some rather

Grandma's Tale

Helping or hindering? Good 7
guys? Few horror directors can

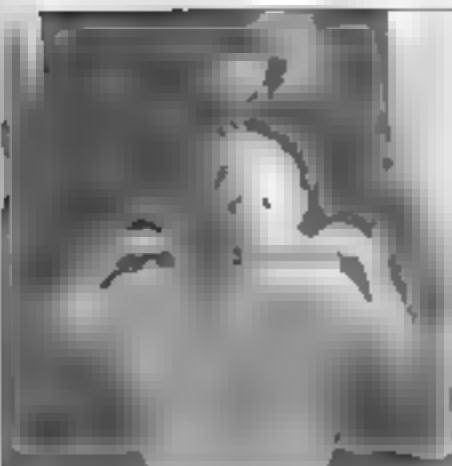
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returne stalking in the woods in the last twenty minutes. Despite that, it is a pleasant enough experience, perhaps best watched on a weekend afternoon rather than during a late-night horror session.

The strained relations between North and South provide a little extra detail, as the film shows Southern hospitality and its flipside of distrust, while the visiting Yankees are given to crude assumptions and a lack of country manners. Locals are sensitive to being misrepresented: "Don't want folks coming round making us look like a bunch o' dumb rednecks," says one old-timer. The sheriff is an unfriendly type, but even he has the safety of the visitors at heart. So while the North-South differences are acknowledged, there's little sense of friction. As a film made by a Southern director, *Creature from Black Lake* is ironically less peculiar in tone than *Two Thumbs Up* (directed by Chicago-born but Southern-sympathizing Herschel Gordon Lewis, who shot for friends Newman and Jack Jr. was born on 26 January 1942. He was the son of a Southern theatre chain owner who produced low-budget films to be distributed to his own cinemas. Houck Sr. a company Howco International began in the 1950s. Some sources conflate father and son in their credits: for example, the IMDb lists Houck Jr. as executive producer on three films made before he was fifteen! Houck Jr. started his filmmaking career with two horror films which he wrote, directed and produced: *Night of Blood* (1969) and *Women and Blood* (1970). He can be seen in *Creature from Black Lake* playing a college lecturer and expert on Bigfoot. He died of heart failure at home, on 1 October 2007.

Made in Louisiana

THE CREEPER

Wes Olsen, 1964
 aka *The Dark Side of Midnight*

I rarely turn my back on a slasher (good advice in real life too, kids), but this dismal effort, at an eye-burning 1.7 minutes, is so senselessly, bloodlessly dull it defeated even my optimism. Cops sit at their desks, arguing on the phone and eviscerating the case in question, viz. "The Creeper" - a murderer so badly concerned he can't even stick to his m.o. Though he's apparently known for attacking beautiful young blondes with hourglass figures, three of the film's six barely-glimpsed killings are anomalous, including two brunettes (one of whom falls) and a six-year-old boy (blond but hardly curvaceous). There is one workable and rather unnerving idea, but it's thrown away in a line of dialogue and a single fluffed scene. The Creeper is said to have struck before, often sneaking into victims' houses and hiding in their attics for weeks or even months before emerging, after midnight, to hit without warning. The idea of a psychopath covertly living in his victims' homes is pregnant with possibilities (see Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*), but it's squashed here. All that's left by way of amusement is to observe the colossal ineptitude of the two cops in charge of the case. At one point, arriving in an attic where The Creeper has been living, and finding his makeshift bed still warm, they settle down to wait for him, only to nod off and alert the returning psycho to their presence by snoring. The standard of acting is appalling throughout, with the cops unengaging and the various victims and relatives incapable of a convincing reaction. Two parents, informed that their daughter has been hacked to death, exhibit a raw grief more befitting the discovery of a smashed ornament than news of bereavement. As this grossly overlong snoozer draws to a close, Officer Brock Johnson (Olson himself) despatches the killer by luring him into a shack and setting fire to it; at least we assume he's despatched, since there's no sign of him burning in the hurried, deeply unimpressive fire scene. Surely this coy approach to the killer's death is simply a shop-worn prelude to a twist where he pops up again, à la Michael Myers? Oh no - in what may be *The Creeper's* only slasher-film innovation, this utterly limp finale really is it: the end, *finis*, forget it. "Well, we must have to hurry about him and more," says Olsen, words that could stand as his directorial epitaph.

Made in California



"CRIMINALLY INSANE"

Nick Phillips (aka Nick Millard aka Steve Millard) (1975) Ethel Janowski. Prisoner 184, a big fat 250lb lump (resembling, is released from psychiatric incarceration into the care of her grandmother, Jane Lambert. A doctor suggests to Grandma that she should try to help Ethel lose weight. On her first night of freedom, Ethel wakes up and blunders downstairs looking for food, but Grandma has locked the kitchen cupboard and emptied the icebox. Thwarted, she attacks the cupboard with a knife. When Grandma wakes up and tries to stop her, Ethel snuffs the old lady death, finishes her midnight snack, drags Grandma's corpse upstairs and locks it in her room. Next morning, Ethel telephones the store and places a humongous \$80 food order. When the delivery boy arrives, Ethel realises there's no money in the house (she has \$4.50). Not to be denied, she kills the kid, slashes the kid and locks in to those groceries. Ethel's prostitute sister Rosalie invites herself over to stay, moves her pimp in with her, and uses the spare room to service her clients. Then a police officer (George Buck Flower) arrives, looking for the missing delivery boy. And so Ethel's murder-sprees continues, as various interlopers and busy-bodies threaten to expose her as a mad and - worse still - interfere with her mealtimes.

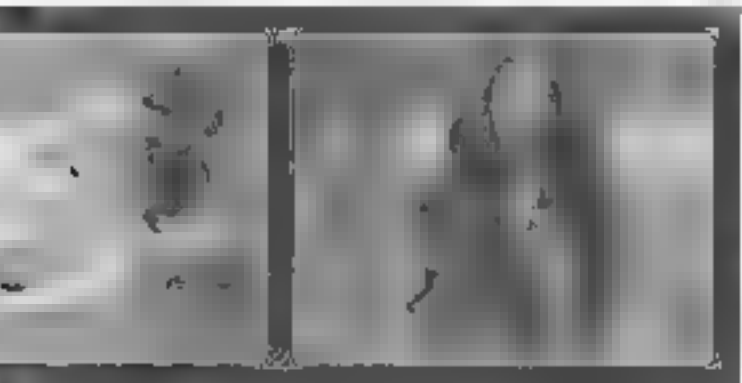
Criminally Insane is a short but perfectly formed little masterpiece. Truncated to the bone with a lean running time of 45 minutes, it is a model of restraint and concision. What's immediately so impressive is the simplicity and starkness of concept, and the comic banality of the killer's motive. Abel Ferrara has rightfully been praised for his film *The Drifter Killer*, in which a man is driven crazy not by sexual dysfunction but insipient poverty. Ethel is another of the psycho-genre's mis-shapes, because she can't stop eating. Oh sure, you can theorise that this fat woman probably has an unhappy little girl inside screaming out, but part of the fascination with this movie is its unapologetic disinterest in psychological motivation. Everyone's got a soft spot, it seems to say, so who cares who made Ethel such a greedy-faced bitch? Of course obese people have problems regulating the appetites, and being slowly smothered by 250lbs of lard is no

turn anyone better but the director is having none of this bleeding heart stuff. Ethel's blankly disinterested attitude to anything other than food is echoed by the film's scorn for the niceties of plot and characterisation. I wouldn't want every psycho I'm in to be made this way, but I love how flat and bleak this is - it is like a deeply unsympathetic fly-on-the-wall documentary. The lack of a real storyline makes it all feel vaguely Warholian, something the matter fact performances help to foster: you can imagine Brigid Polk in *an A Woman's Boy* getting on with Ethel. Most importantly, Priscilla Allen plays her with a sullen distance that ensures that the subject matter doesn't flare into camp. And Ethel has a bit attitude with her hunger-pangs. Like that other belly horror star Martha in *The Homecoming Killers*, Ethel is prone to anti-Semitic outbursts: "That Goddam Jew doctor gave them orders not to give me enough to eat," she explains to her grandma. "They were trying save money and starve me while they were at it." And when the old lady tries to stop her breaking into the kitchen cupboard, she exclaims, "You and that Hech are trying to starve me to death!" It's a detail that ensures we keep our distance even though we're seduced by how awful she is, and it means we don't feel so bad withholding our sympathy. After all, Ethel's problem is nothing a stay in Buchenwald wouldn't cure.

Made in California,
also *Satan's Black Wedding*

CRYPT OF DARK SECRETS

Jack Weiss (1976).
Another exercise in tedium from the New Orleans-based Jack Weiss, he of the mindlessly redundant *Blood Feast* rip-off, *March Massacre* (1978), *Crypt of Dark Secrets* is fractionally better but still feels like congealed genre leftovers. For the first ten minutes, all you get is a shot of immortal voodoo Queen Damballa (Maureen Ridley) dancing in some obscure ritual, and two cops (Herb Janncke and Wayne Mack) boating through the Louisiana Bayou, explaining the back-story (mysterious woman sighted on haunted Bayou island) with a lack of enthusiasm you soon come to share. The story eventually grinds into second gear when three jewel thieves, Earl, Max and Louise (Clutch Bennett, Harry Ellier and Barbara Hageny), move in on Bayou bachelor Ted Watkins (Ronnie Lacey), beating him to death and chucking his denim-swathed body into the creek. Damballa takes pity and revives him by performing a sexy nude dance (Ridley is noticeably better at nude dancing than antique, which perhaps gives a clue as to where Weiss discovered her). Back in town, another voodoo woman (Suzie Smith) is shown sticking huge pins in a man's back while he sits silent and motionless by her suburban fireplace. We never do find out why, but it works like a fun hobby. As smoke curls from between the trees, we see flashbacks to Damballa's tribal origins (perhaps footage from an abandoned production, to judge by the difference in picture grain). Damballa tells Ted that he is now one of the living dead: an ontological paradox that bolsters him just a jot. She helps him to take his revenge against the thieves, and then marries him, in a ceremony that takes place beyond the vale of death (thus presumably shortening the marriage vows a little). The natural place to bring this story to an end, you'd think, except that Weiss, obviously struggling with this up to feature-length, adds another pointlessly protracted boat ride through the swamps in the underwhelming company of the



earlier policeman. At least the locations are beautiful, and if you die Maureen Ridley's oiled breasts you'll be more than happy, but really this is forgettable type that belongs in the swamps, beyond even the most powerful voodoo Queen's ability to revive. By the way, despite the pleasingly Gothic title, there's no crypt in the film.
This was Weiss's third movie, following *Quadrone* (1972, co-directed with Herbert Janncke Jr.), about a white boy teaching English to mulatto prostitutes in the 1830s, and *Savannah* (1974), a period drama about New Orleans life at the birth of the jazz age. What's notable is that Weiss clearly had a great love and admiration for New Orleans, always shooting there and, as the subjects of his first two movies show, taking a genuine interest in the city's history. Note some sources erroneously list *Crypt of Dark Secrets* as an alternative title for Weiss's later film *March Massacre*.
Made in Louisiana.

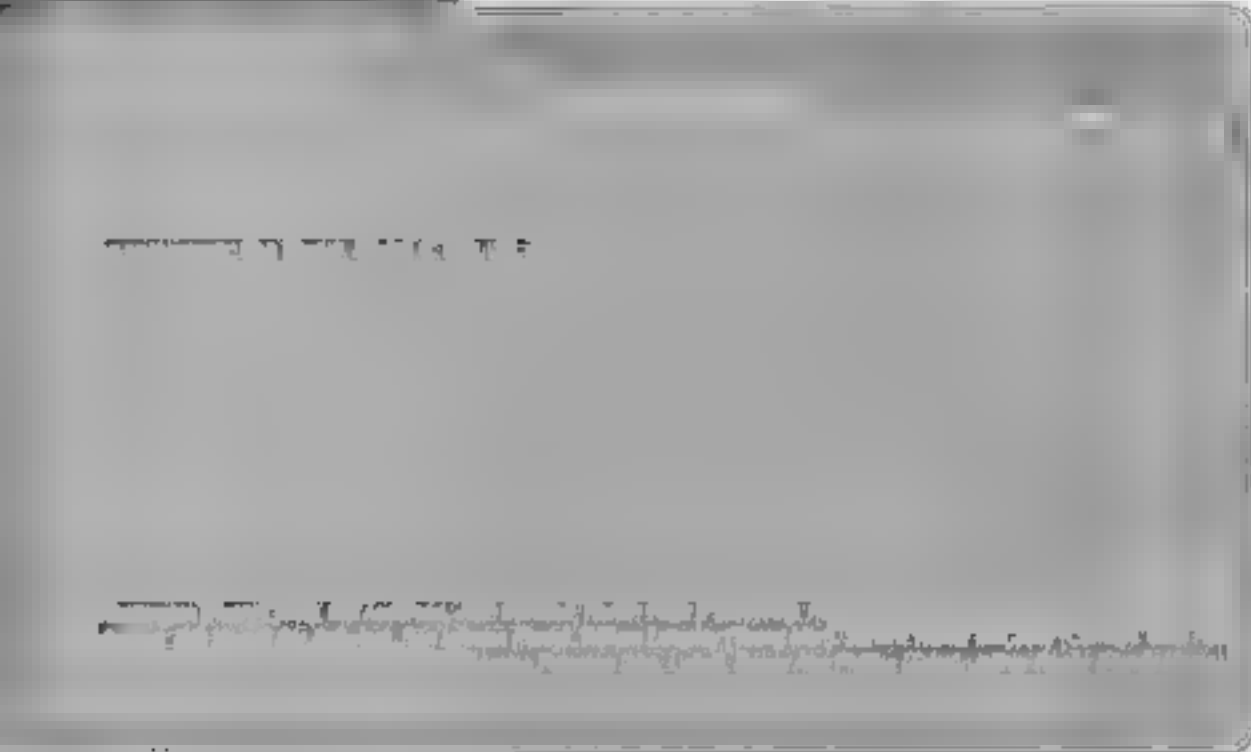
CURSE OF THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN

John Kirkland [Leonard Koppman] (1972)
Mark (William Marland Proctor) inherits a Wild West tourist trap from his uncle, but a codicil stipulates that he must turn a profit within six months or he'll forfeit the lot. Heading for the ranch with fiancée Brenda (Claudia Ream), and a gaggle of hippie writers as guests, Mark plans to turn it into a music and theatre venue, but it's not to be. When someone dies after seeing a Headless Horseman prowling the area, it seems that the dire warnings of sinister old foreman Solomon (H.G. Fisher) are coming true.
Ouch. I watched this the day after *A Woman's Curfew of Blood*, and please, heed my dire warning - it's not recommended. The uneventful, meandering story is made harder to take by poorly recorded dialogue and a clueless directorial style. Warhol's Ultra Violet appears as a visiting Contessa (who's given Ultra Violet's real name, Isabelle Collin Dufresne) incongruously toting a



Real name: Maureen Ridley
Here comes Ethel
... would rent *Curse of the Headless Horseman* on the strength of *March Massacre*.
...
Surely somewhere in New Orleans there's an immortal voodoo Queen for all of us. It's Damballa (the exquisitely named Maureen Ridley) beside her beau Ronnie Lacey in *Crypt of Dark Secrets*.





Superman lunchbox. Presumably the addled 'superstar' was unable to distinguish between Wagner's experimental 'underacting' and a human inability. The final revelations are pure. I'd have got away with it too if it wasn't for you credit my kais. And the only highlight is a demonstration of how to take a headless horseman with some bits of bent wire and a cape. Morland Proctor a regular for John Hayes the 4 in *Punching*, *The Cat Thrill*, *All the Living Animals* and *Curse of the Devil* is okay as the hero, but this is a viewing where you really ought to spare yourselves. When Kurtman crossed over to hardcore porn, he did us all a favour. Writer Kenn Riddle, who provides a treasure, verbose script replete with washed-up purple prose, was even more considerate: he disappeared completely.

Made in New York State.
aka. *Carnival of Blood*

THE CURSE OF THE SCREAMING DEAD

Tony Maudonick 1982
See interview with Tony Maudonick

Made in Maryland.

THE DARK

John 'Bud' Cardos 1977 production 1978 (copyright) 1979

This project, presumably called *The Dark* to give its makers a real order, an excuse to hide in the shadows, is a twenty-four-carat time waster. For a start, the emphasis is relentlessly on the police, police police as the way to 'solve' the night to explain to horror film writers that telling your tale via a police investigation is the scripting equivalent of moving your lips when you read. Mind you, the alternatives presented here aren't much better: namely a cynical reporter (Cathy Lee Crosby) who wants to do something real instead of covering the latest Hollywood hitman; and a supposed writer of horror fiction (William Devane) who never takes his dark glasses off long enough to type a th-k-note. The only person to come out of the woodwork is a psycho (John Hyde, who plays an eccentric psychic with a doctor's hat) who has this from the nine: Meanwhile the monster which looks like a steal from William Girdler's *The Munster* eats the heads off people you don't give a rat's ass about, and since you can barely see them in the time it's even harder to see. Even porno director Michael Fendley's *Shriek of the Mutated* had a better monster. Eventually the production wraps: the finish line the monster is cornered by the cops

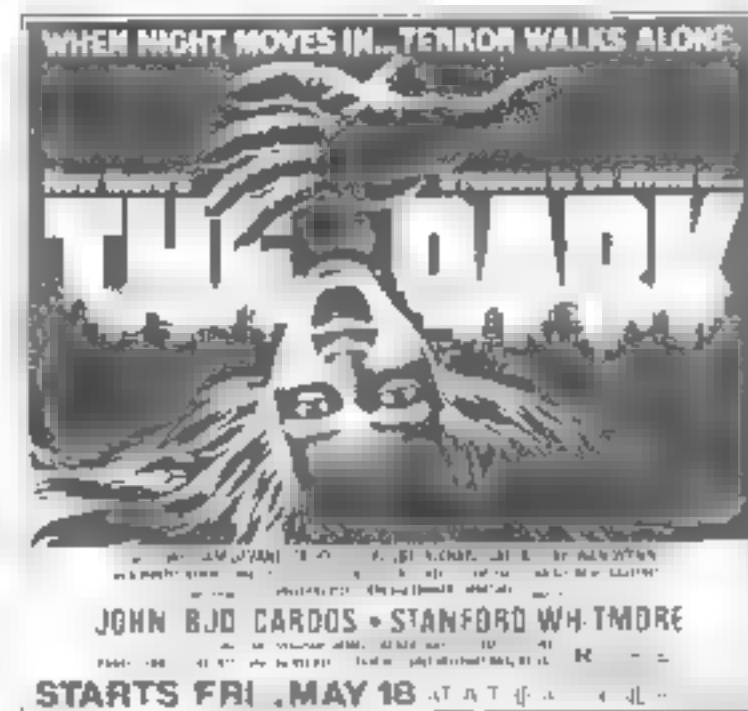


and the stupid thing explodes when someone sets fire to it (dumb ending for a dumb movie).

I never saw this back in the early days of video, when it was released in the UK by Cinelife. I was already pissed off. Carpenter's *The Fog* was not an adaptation of James Herbert's fantastically brutal novel. Herbert's follow-up novel *The Dark* was even nastier, so when a movie of the same title appeared with Herbert's name on it I was dumfounded if I was going to subject myself to more disappointment. Well, John Carpenter's *The Fog* turned out to be an atmospheric treasure in its own right, however it dreck whatever your expectations.

The original director, John Carpenter, was sacked very late shoot, and replaced by John 'Bud' Cardos. It would be a mistake to place the blame entirely with Cardos, though: stepping in at the last minute, his role was probably just to meet the deadline, keep the production rolling, and make the best of a bad job. Stan and Whitmore, a screenwriter of mainly TV movies, is a culpable as anyone. (The Huyler has remained close-lipped as to why he was sacked (not surprisingly), so we may never know what he thought he could do with such apparently unimpressive material.)

Made in California.



DARK AUGUST

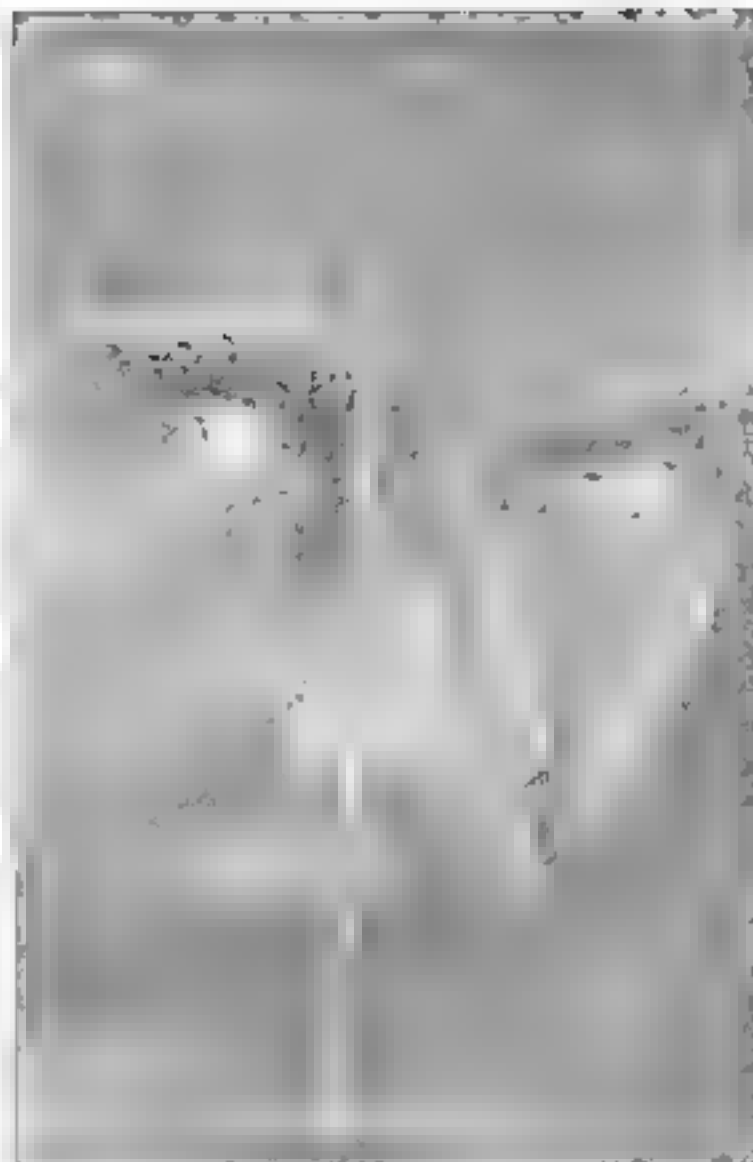
Marvin Goldmann (1975)

aka *The Hunt*

After Sam Devino (J.J. Barry) kills a little girl in a road accident, he falls under the vengeful curse of the child's bitter, menacing grandfather, Ned McDermott (William Robertson). Becoming more and more jumpy, Sam sees a cowed figure lurking in the woods around his home. He glimpses the figure again while working with his brother Paul (Richard Alan Ray) on a construction site, his drunkenness causing his brother a nasty accident. A family friend, Lesley (Kane McKewen), performs a Tarot reading and detects the presence of a 'magician' creating trouble in Sam's life. Lesley and Sam's wife Jackie (Cecile Shelyne), drag him off to meet Adriana (Kim Hunter), a witch whom Lesley believes is capable of lifting the malefic咒. After Sam burns down his home in an unsuccessful attempt to lift the curse, Jackie steals a fetus representing her husband from McDermott's basement, which forms the basis of Adriana's magical counter-attack.

Unspectacular perhaps, and lacking a satisfying ending, *Dark August* is nevertheless a decent, well-acted tale of guilt, vengeance and witchcraft. Add to this an attractively photographed, unfamiliar small-town milieu (Suwa, in Vermont) and a gentle critique of prejudice against the occult, and you have a quietly unsettling genre piece with a few jolting surprises and enough brooding menace to infuse the sleepy pacing. William S. Fisher's music is frequently excellent, with chromatic progressive rock and melancholy piano breathing life into the drama. A recurrently blaring synthesizer is more irritating than unsettling, but it does at least add punch to scenes such as the one where Jackie breaks into McDermott's basement. Generally rather formulaic in style, the film relies for its impact on the acting, which is always solid and at times fairly nuanced. The male lead J.J. Barry, however, is not the most appealing of screen presences. His stocky, slightly dwarfish build and saturnine, gone-to-seed appearance suggest a miniaturised Eric Bogosian and, as played, his character is riskily unsympathetic.

Although McDermott is clearly shown casting a spell and constructing a voodoo fetish in the pre-credits sequence, ambiguity regarding the efficacy of the occult is maintained for quite a while. Goldmann's script hovers between the rational and the supernatural in a way that recalls Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (although one has to say he could profitably have rided Polanski for tension as well as ambivalence). *Dark August* has a literary feel that



makes one think of writers like M.R. James and Fritz Leiber. Sam is another of those 'Doubting Thomas' protagonists so popular in the occult horror sub-genre. There's a focus on accidents and their interpretation that reminded me of Ramsey Campbell's novels, especially *The Count of Eleven* and *Obsession*. As with Campbell's writing, the script for *Dark August* finds unease in the small details of life – in the larval paranoia and anxieties we try to control, but which can hatch and overwhelm us at any moment.

First-reading Adriana is introduced sympathetically, without stereotyping: she's a practical, sociable woman whose first flicker of witchery is to admit 'an absolute passion for pumpkin seeds'. Her first idea for lifting the curse is for Sam to burn down his artist's studio – site of the first spectral visit – while reciting an incantation and throwing a vial of poison into the flames. In a painfully comic sequence that again bears comparison to Campbell's *The Count of Eleven*, the fire brigade and police arrive *before* Sam can complete the incantation. As his future plans go up in smoke, burly cops throw him to the ground and arrest him for arson; the spell is unbroken. The second spell involves Adriana using a clay torso stolen from McDermott's basement as the focus of a banishing ritual. That this tense scene culminates with merely a slung fist blow and a deeply unsatisfying shadow of the demon – a pity, given Kim Hunter's not too committed performance. Even those who sneer at the monster in Jacques Tourneur's *Night of the Demon* might agree that here, at least, is a film in need of a crowd-pleasing Beelzebub. Without it, *Dark August* appears simply to lack the necessary energy. And the coda, in which Sam blunders into a secret fire that seems at last to assuage the old man's loss, feels like an appeal to tender emotions unsupported by the earlier drama. Weak ending aside, however, *Dark August* merits a higher genre profile and approaches a topic so often reduced to theretofore's utopianism with a sober eye and a will to explore ideas.

Goldmann had previously directed a black-and-white western, *The Legend of Angger & Hunter* (1973), featuring the formidable Fred Williamson in an early starring role, but after *Dark August* he disappeared off the radar until *Legend of the Spirit Dancer* in 1997 (a title that suggests a link to the ending of *Dark August*).

Made in Vermont.



Dark August was released twice on VHS video. The cover here is by PMA, whose other JS horror title was Roy Hattersley's *The House on Skull Mountain*.

Dark August was also issued by BFI, whose cover art piggybacks on the original.

The *Dark* squandered its urban locale and refuses to scare us, but at least the graphic designer's work was trying.

top right An alien girl Zora mutates far left From the novelisation, a young

missa et cetera bottom left A passing space-traveller greets



THE DARK POWER

Phil Sarno (1985)

If this film had played its zombie Tltec Indians straight instead of conning them up with snuff growls and slapstick, *The Dark Power* would have been a much more pleasing twist on the Ju Indian curse subgenre: a twist because, after thirty minutes of build-up on the subject, it turns into a sorority slaughter film. Despite lots of earnest talk about the history of the Tltec of Mexico and their possible links with the Red Indian tribes of North America, we're eventually sidetracked into slasher territory when a cursed house on a sacred site is converted into dorm space for a quartet of co-eds. A ' seems to be shaping up well, with lots of unsympathetic teen characters: one girl, a nasty racist bitch, turns against her friends because they've invited a black friend to move in; lots of horrible chain-smoking boys are seen to drink beer and listen to loud music; and a helpful hand emerges from the soil outside. We're on course for a blend of *Sorority House Massacre* and *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (a combination I never realised I wanted, but which sure looks good on paper). Unfortunately, the spell is broken when the Tltec zombies turn out to be lumbered with atrocious Halloween masks and broad gestures more suited to a campy TV horror-host. Instead of showing us a bunch of college assholes being picturesquely slaughtered by the undead, *The Dark Power* begins to resemble a movie made by the victims. Comedy horror requires a ferocious intelligence and a tight grip on the material: it's not something that can easily survive bad scripting and a low budget. Sadly, the simple pleasures promised at the start of the film are thrown aside in favour of something beyond the sophistication of the filmmakers.

It's worth pointing out that this is actually a star vehicle for Mr Lash LaRue, a grizzled Southern gentleman who likes nothing more than to show the world his dexterity with a whip. It seems the lash of Mr LaRue is, among other things, a major hitchhiker magnet. *The Dark Power's* spunky reporter-heroine starts off a

liberated gal, but within seconds of meeting Lash she's drooling over his earthy whip-wielding charms. And it's all whuppin' dunnin' Lash who saves the day, defeating the Tltec warriors and rescuing the girls. (Perhaps the title refers to Mr LaRue, not the mupsters?) LaRue, a veteran of numerous Wu West epics in the forties and fifties, was coaxed out of retirement by North Carolina producer Ear Owensby for Worth Keeter's *Chain Gang* (1984). He stayed around to appear in *The Dark Power* (shot primarily at Bejew's Creek, North Carolina) and Smoot's *Alien Outlaw* (made the same year. Smoot was also production manager on LaRue's 1981 film, *Escape*, dir. Richard Styles, 1990).

Made in North Carolina

THE DARK RIDE

Jeremy Hoernack (1977)

aka *Killer's Delight*

aka *The Sport Killer*

Danny John Karlen), a serial killer with a hatred of women and a penchant for disguise, is abducting and murdering poor girls who hitchhike around the San Fernando region. Sgt. Vince De Carlo (James Luisi) and Dr. Carol Thompson (Susan Sullivan) set a trap for him with Carol as bait, but intelligent paranoid psychopaths are notoriously difficult to fool.

This is a sombre film lacking the visceral kick to compete with more exploitative treatments of the same theme. Of interest, though, is the way *The Dark Ride* anticipates the movie operetta of serial killer Ted Bundy, depicting an outwardly respectable man, with a penchant for disguise, picking off young female hitch hikers. Many sources list *The Dark Ride* as made in 1979; it was in fact shot in 1976. Bundy began his killing spree in 1974 but he wasn't caught until February of 1977. Of less interest is the time spent in the company of the police. De Carlo suffers the usual problems, a fractious boss and a worried wife, and the script leans heavily on the movie cliché that cops have to break the law in order to save us from psychopaths. The murders are largely of the off-screen variety, although the pick-up sequences and crime scene aftermaths have a certain grossness that at least prevents the film from adding titchiness to its list of drawbacks. Unlike more sensationalised treatments, the topic isn't Berwick's *Hitch Hike to Hell* for instance. *The Dark Ride* goes for shock value just once, in a scene where a victim is strapp'd and molested while her companion is forced to watch; otherwise it's a fairly routine stroll through the nasty newspaper headlines of the mid-seventies. Hoernack makes good use of the scenic but forbidding hills of the San Fernando Valley. Byron Olson's sparse score enhances the subdued atmosphere and a few gruesome black-and-white photographs of mutilated female corpses are flashed before the camera to compensate for the lack of gore elsewhere, but really the film is efficient without being exciting. It's clear the director has the necessary talents to make a 'normal' movie, but you find yourself wishing for a little more of it.

The Dark Ride would perhaps benefit from a DVD release one day, if only so we could see what was happening during the film's frequent night scenes. A jump and an audio glitch in the British video release (from VRC) give the impression of a missing scene: we see the killer menace a victim he's keeping trussed up in his garage, and when we see her again later there's an unexplained flesh wound on her thigh. I doubt though that another fleeting glimpse of blood and violence would do much to change the emphasis of what is basically a police procedural sheep in slasher wolf's clothing.

Hoernack was born in Washington DC, and raised in Bethesda, Maryland before moving to L.A. Although his primary area of specialisation was physics, he finished up at UC LA film school. Soon after leaving college he began working as an editor in films like Fern Sebastian's *The Hitchhikers* (1971) and Charles Pierce's *Boatleggers* (1974). He was also assistant editor on the groundbreakin' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*

97+), and has since notched up over two hundred credits as a sound editor, sound designer/re-recording mixer, including *entire* (1984), *The Beastmaster* (1987), *Beloved* (1987), *Footfall* (1988), and *Damon Wayans's Belting the Truth* (2004). In 1981 Hoenack invented a new, feature-film quality electronic editing system which revolutionised the sound design field. He went on to set up Sound Trax Studios, and is known in the industry as an innovator for film sound. The newest invention to emerge from Hoenack's company is the ADR BRA NTR which speeds up and hones the accuracy of analogue looping (dubbing), by utilising digital time-compression technology to bring perfect sync to each syllable.

Jeremy Hoenack on *The Dark Ride*: Your review is quite accurate. If the subject of this film ever comes up in conversation and not if I can help it, I explain that when I made it, I actually made two films at the same time – my first one was just *The Original Sin* but *The Sport Killer* but only for foreign theatrical and video. It was released theatrically in the US as *Killer's Delight* – not my choice – then for US and world via *The Dark Ride* – my choice. To our credit, the film was made in 1976, and based on research, before Bundy was caught. Our depiction of his M.O. and psyche turned out to be pretty accurate. On the other hand, the execution left a lot to be desired. I appreciate the kind comments you did make. Things I learned – don't use actors that are terrible. I didn't know how to make a movie – pretty terrible acting. The story overly relied on references and too much cop talk blah blah. The film would have benefited greatly from some visceral day-for-night scenes of our ill-fated chasing his prey through the woods and playing with him before the dirty deed. I was and am much too tame in gore and gore. The finger lick was actually added after the fact. It is up a bit but obviously not nearly enough. The interior of the police station, the psychiatrist's office and the night club were actually inside my house. The shrink is me. The woods and tow shots are all San Fernando Valley as well as the car chase – revving the body and beginning to launch it. The rear

view of a man flying through the air is Marilyn Thomas in back of my house en-route to my pool. All aerial shots are San Francisco with the wide shots of the van parking and Johnny Karter throwing a weighted blow-up doll off the cliff. So the title sequence is shot in four different locations. I used my own money and Marilyn's supplemented by some friends and family. The entire cash budget was under 10th – basically the cost of film stock equipment rental and 540 minimums. Then a little more for lab fees and mixing. The rest of the costs were deferrals. My biggest mistake was turning down a great offer with a big cash advance from Crown International, who intended to do a wide release. They had a great record of saturation releases of films like this. Crown President Mark T. was very taken with Susan Sullivan and felt she had the star power to generate very favourable market conditions. Instead, I foolishly listened to a little crook who assured me I would make much more money from him – a foreign alone – but I received almost nothing from the crook over the next few years. Then, when I finally got a decent video release from a legit company, they later discovered the crook had sold a lot of territories he never disclosed. They were rightfully upset, causing the video deal to be renegotiated much less favourably. By this time the creep had passed away. I soon went back to my physics roots and developed technology that eventually led to my company – and I'm still in it.

Made in California

DATE WITH A KIDNAPPER

Frederick Friedel (1975)
See interview with Frederick Friedel

Made in North Carolina

THE DEADLY SPAWN

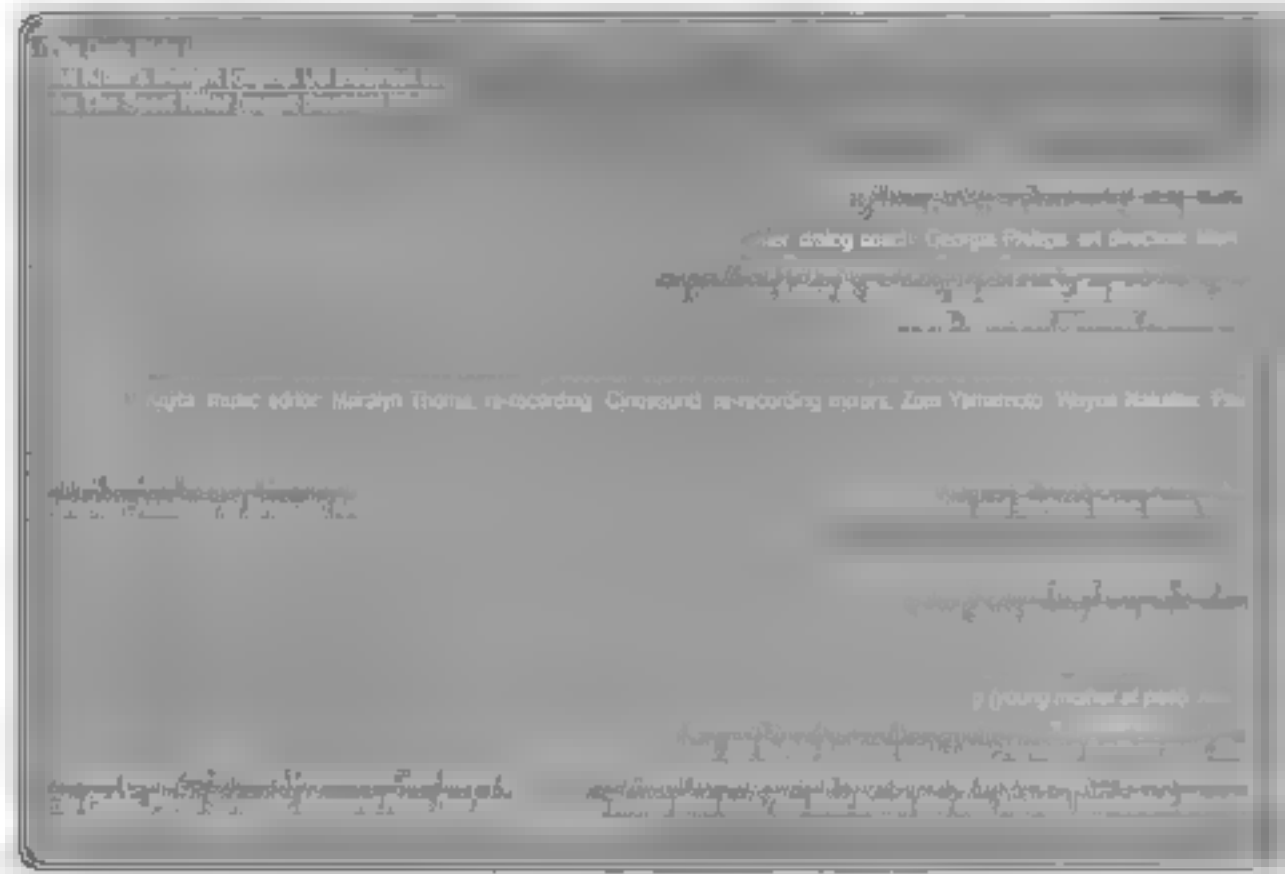
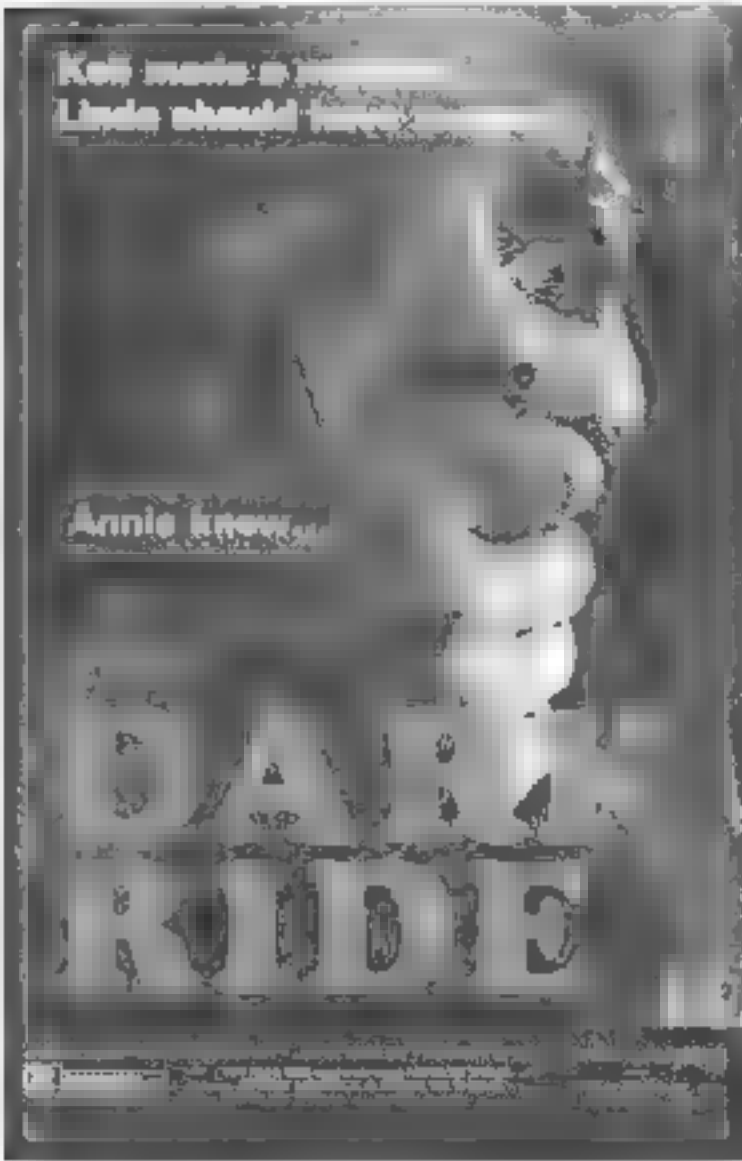
Douglas McKeown (1982)
See interview with Douglas McKeown

Made in New Jersey

DEATH BED: THE BEL THAT FAYS

George Barry (1977)
See interview with George Barry

Made in Michigan



POVERTY

• Tobe Hooper (1976)

aka *Painted Alive*

aka *Starlight Slougher*

aka *Shower Hotel*

aka *Lynxers of the Bayou*

aka *Murder on the Bayou*

aka *Shower Hotel: Murder*

Crazy old Judd (Newt Branda) runs the Starlight Hotel, little more than a run-down shack on the outskirts of Bayou country. The hotel is directly next to a swamp where Judd's 'pet' alligator swims – he insists it's really a crocodile from Africa. When Clara (Robert Collins), a young prostitute, decides to leave the local whorehouse and look for other work, she fetches up at the Starlight. Judd attacks her and feeds her to the alligator. No wonder his clientele is no more than a family – Faye (Marilyn Burns), Roy (William Finley) and little daughter Angie (Kyle Richards) drop in, looking for a room. Things get off to a bad start when the family dog gets eaten by the alligator. Roy tries to shoot the creature but Judd attacks him, pushing him into the swamp where the reptile finishes him off. Judd then trusses Faye to an upstairs bed and chases Angie underneath the hotel, locking her in the crawlspace. Harvey (Mel Ferrer) and Libby Wood (Caryn Sinclair), Clara's father and sister, stop by, looking for their missing relative. They show Judd a photograph of Clara, but he claims never to have seen her. At Judd's suggestion, Harvey and Libby visit the whorehouse, with Sheriff Martin (Stuart Whitman) in tow. 'The Ma'am' Miss Hattie (Carolyn Jones), also denies seeing the girl. Harvey returns to the hotel while Libby heads to the local bar to share her woes with the sheriff. At the hotel, Harvey hears Angie trapped in the crawlspace and goes to investigate. Before he can free her, Judd slams a log through his neck and – you guessed it – feeds him to the alligator. He then crawls under the hotel after Angie, who finds herself ripped between Judd and his net, which has gained entrance to the crawlspace. As the film builds to a frenzied finale, yet more visitors drop in. Libby returns to find Faye bound and gagged in the next room, and everything dissolves in a whirlpool of screaming, scripping, squeaking and roaring.

Death Trap has always lived in the shadow of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but it nevertheless shares blood with that flawless masterpiece. Perhaps the film's biggest handicap is that it's filmed entirely on studio sets. *Chain Saw* showed that Hooper was born out at making locations for maximum unease, and you'd expect *Death Trap* to take a similar approach. The film is set in Louisiana, swamp country, and if directors like Jack West (*Crapt of Dark Secrets*) or – erd & Beverly Sebastian (*Qatar Heat*) could get good footage out of the Bayou, surely Hooper would excel. Instead, *Death Trap*'s studio-bound sets challenge the plot-scapes of early *Star Trek* for fakery. People staggered out of screenings of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* looking almost as freaked as the unfortunate Sally, who escaped the saw with her innards if not her marbles intact. So how did Hooper come to follow a film hailed as almost too realistic with something so alienating and anti-naturalistic?

It's part of the charm and stigma of cinema that even the most invidious of films can achieve fleeting magic through a felicity of location – accidental details of smoggy stone-work, looming skies, or the uncomprehending faces of onlookers, can breathe magic into the tongue even if the story itself is clichéd. Sometimes directors can harness this quality and make it work as part of an overall vision – George Romero with *Martin*, for instance – but it can also happen by accident. There's a beauty in the indifference of the world, its impassive, enigmatic neutrality, that the cinema can encapsulate effortlessly. On *Death Trap*, Hooper loses this resource, but gains the polar opposite: every shot is unreal, a *troupe l'oeuil* construction. As composer Wayne Bell explains, Hooper was living in Los Angeles at the time. It seems likely that the script was written with the intention of filming on location, until lack of money forced a studio-bound compromise.

The film begins with an image of the moon. On the soundtrack, music takes the dark sky as a cue and fills the air with frantic electronics in vibration. This audio delirium recurs throughout the film. The soundtrack mixes and clamours with myriad sounds and clashing musical styles. Crazy Judd has a mind like a detuned radio, skimming back and forth between the raw and psychotic, and the film employs free electronic sound-effects and rambling Country & Western to echo the wreckage of his psyche.

Hooper then fractures the story by superimposing narrative threads, using the hotel itself as a fixed co-ordinate. The Starlight Hotel has three levels, and various strands of the narrative are enacted on each. At ground level there's the foyer, leading to guest rooms and Judd's quarters. On the first floor – or second floor in American usage! – are a few more rudimentary guestrooms, and a dirty, shadowy bathroom. Beneath the house there's a crawlspace, full of cobwebby junk. As the film piles horror upon horror in the last twenty minutes, all three levels are occupied simultaneously, creating a layered, chaotic, overcrowded sensation. There are times when *Death Trap* turns to insane cacophony: screams and wailing beatings from upstairs, as Faye struggles to free herself; Judd's cracked *lullaby* *profondo* mauling and incessant C & W radio on the ground floor; and creaks and rat-squeaks from the crawlspace as the alligator hunts little Angie, whose pipistrelle screams do battle with Wayne Bell's chattering electronics. There are passages in the film that border on hysteria, and they demonstrate the director's continued ability, not lost after *Chain Saw*, as detractors claim, to summon an authentic peak of derangement and mental collapse. The film positively groins with pressure created by the cramped *mise en scene* and relentless soundscaping. And it's all wrapped up in a flagrant, phoney-looking backlot movie-set masquerading as the great outdoors. Could this movie actually get any weirder?

Death Trap may summon the craziness of its forebear, but its play with melodrama and artifice is almost diametrically opposed. The supporting actors give stylised performances: the black maid in the whorehouse is like something from *Tom & Jerry* and the fighting is blatantly cartoonish, with dramatically unmotivated reds and blues as bold and irrational as *Serpico*. Years later, George Romero and Stephen King would attempt to recreate the design of 1970s horror comics such as *Fury* and *Wolf* later in their homage to the era, *Creepshow*. But Hooper was there before them.

This would be nothing but window-dressing, however, if not for an alarmingly plausible performance by Newt Branda, who provides *Death Trap*'s strongest link to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. In his characterization you can see traces of all the *Chain Saw* family: the pseudo-civilized snarl of the Cook, the bloodlust of Leatherface, and the teeming sadism of the Hitchhiker. Also, in a pre-echo of 'Chop-Top' in *Chain Saw 2*, Judd is an ex-soldier, as we discover in a great scene where Branda free-associates a sarcastic parody of parade ground drill without Branda. *Death Trap* could have seemed just a gaudy, untidy experimental piece of film-fam. Fortunately, Hooper knows when he's onto a good thing, letting Branda have his way with the role. In fact, some of the most effective passages of the film occur when only Branda is onscreen. For instance, after killing Roy, Judd wanders off into reverie, and the camera slowly explores his room – a scrappy, barely decorated Taj Mahal with a few ragged bits of junk. Time slows down, the image drifts, and the electronic soundtrack provides a sieve of pitch-bending over which Judd sings:

Have round, tumble down,
Stumble round to the room,
Don't got no ticket, don't got no bag,
Sittin' waitin' on the trap.

Hooper allows the forlorn, reflective tone of Judd's singing and the eerie electronic shrieks of the Wayne Bell score to blend for two or three minutes, shunting the film down a sliding into Judd's strange and solitary world. He's trying on different parts of



Death Trap gets into gear with a grindingly

Demented

opposite page, top right
we masked morons soon to regret their

on-site bottom, clockwise from top left

The Demons of Ludlow

he wondered William Finley, as over-the-top
being eaten by an alligator as he was while
arguing with his wife in Death Trap



involved in other musical projects. Toke gave me a call in the spring of 1976 as a heads up that he would soon want me to come out to Los Angeles, where he was now living and working to help him knock out a score for the film he was currently editing. (Unlike Chain Saw, I had no part in the shooting phase of this film. It wasn't a high-paying deal, but he would pay up cover expenses, and promised to introduce me to various moviemaking folks. I believe his idea was that I might find more work and want to stay.

In L.A., I lived in Marilyn Burns's apartment and set up our makeshift music and recording studio in an empty room of Toke's apartment nearby. I believe we recorded the Death Trap score in the summer of 1976. I can't remember our instrumentation, but I think it was similar to what we used on Chain Saw, with a few notable differences. The hard sounds are actual hard-calling devices of mine, used by hunters and naturalists. One instrument didn't have this. I mislaid my upright bass, which we did all sorts of torturous things to in the Chain Saw sessions. The thing was way too big for my little car, and knowing the way we would abuse one if we had it, there was no point being of owning one. I did bring along my cymbals and percussion instruments and mallets, along with a number of children's toys and toy instruments that we'd used before. I also brought a tape I'd recorded studio of processed cymbals that we used. I believe I also brought my Hujner electric bass (like McCartney's bass) and lap steel guitar. I know Toke had some more toys and probably a dulcimer. One new thing he had, which would bite us later, was one of the earliest commercially available small synthesizers. It was the latest wonder toy, and of course we couldn't resist playing with it, and it probably was overused. I remember enjoying its sound as would play, then find that some sound tucking when I put it up against picture in the editing room. One particular piece I recall played great in the recording room but sounded simply like noise out of a Motorola speaker. I don't recall him using the cymbal sounds either up in the final mix. It's a sound I would return later when Kim Henkel did his turn at a Chain Saw sequel, *The Return of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Our method for both Death Trap and Chain Saw was not to score to picture, but to create a library of music and sound, then sit in the editing room, in a way, our version of what was called a track job in Hollywood at the time. A track job was a music editing practice usually on B-movie schlock stuff and industrials, wherein the editor would simply cut from an existing music library that the producer already had rights to, or that could be bought cheaply. The idea was to very quickly plug something in the music track that at least came close to working, and create it on by Friday. Our method was to create a library of extended and sessions done on a basic turn related to the movie to go. *Tenation*, *Child Abuse*, *Southern Madness*, etc., then the editing tailor them (and in some cases overlap them) to fit the dynamics of the scene. If you've created enough swells, changes, static sections, etc. It is quite possible to cut and splice and make it sound like it was scored to picture. I think this is still a viable method for a film that doesn't require an orchestral or song-based score, and I would encourage filmmakers on a budget to try it. One of the positives of this method is it allows plenty of room for serendipity, trying things you wouldn't have thought of if trying to compose synchronously to picture. Being overly synchronous was one of the problems I had with Saw's score, although I can't fault the guy too much because made the same mistake on *Chainsaw 4*.

I regret I have about the music on the original Chain Saw. We had to rush through the music edit. Toke cut it in very fast because we were under serious deadline pressure. By rights, given our method, the editing phase is an important part of the creative process and deserves plenty of time. But with our situation, Toke adopted a style of sitting in something that worked, and letting it continue to fall apart, then cutting the music there, letting only the movie play from that point, splicing right into a bit (probably the trashy music it sounded right again

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splicing it right there, and then continuing on to the next with picture with it fell apart again. Obviously I can't argue too much with success, but I am... what great stuff we had created and if there were better versions of the same ideas that Toke may didn't have time to find and put in. If we were to ever do original soundtrack album I'd love to cut together a suite of some of that great stuff and let the listener use his imagination in it.

For Death Trap the music edit fell to me, although I had work with an on-site Hollywood music editor Lee Osborne. He was pretty crusty, and had quite a low opinion of the film and the music I was bringing in, although he respected my sense of dramatics, i.e. where to begin a cue, where to end, where to pay me where to lay back, some of which I did in an unorthodox manner. I knew that what we were doing was from another perspective to what he was used to, but I also knew his experience was not something to sneeze at. By the time we were finished, we had both learned a lot from each other. He kind of took me

wang and showed me around the lot we were cutting at, and then Studios on Santa Monica Blvd., and introduced me to Mike Linn, who was especially interesting. We'd go to the heart of the Hollywood old guys, the kind of place where they wouldn't ask you if you wanted a martini before lunch, but how

wanted your martini. I met a lot of interesting characters. Once again, the music edit wasn't allowed the time it needed. We were under quite a deadline crunch. We would be in the room for four while they were mixing reel one on the dubbing stage, consequently I had to make some compromises in places where I would have preferred to take my time.

I couldn't be in the mix until about reel seven. Although I recorded some good cues, I found it wasn't as good as what we'd done for Chain Saw, and we hadn't created nearly as much music given our time pressure. Furthermore, the picture I cutting to just wasn't as interesting as Chain Saw, so when I finished editing I came away feeling only so-so about the whole effort, possible, but I wanted better.

There's a signature part of the Death Trap score I cannot take credit for, blame for. At some point in the middle of the movie while I was still editing, it was decided, not surprisingly, that there was something lacking in the score. We were mixing, Cien Glenn Sound, a very conventional place, and I'm sure we were trying to do was a bit of an assault to their dubbing theatre were a few musical instruments, most notably a celeste. One of the guys there was playing a lullaby on the celeste and the idea struck to include that in the score, which they did in a few places.

Now it's about all I can remember. I took the money I made from Death Trap, rented a room at the Momecino, and met people and explored the Hollywood movie scene. I found I could definitely make a living there, but the place gave me the was especially domestic for Texas music and Texas women. The girls I met in L.A. were all flaky, you'd meet one day and then be gone, and the next day they'd put on a different face, different character. I never knew who they were, but I knew, though it was the same girl. I soon learned to be where you'd look a girl in the eyes, see who's really there, carry on a real conversation, and the next time you see her she's still the same person, and very comfortable in her own skin. I wanted real women, not the L.A. version. I decided to go with my heart, return to Texas, and figure out a way to do music and sound for film and make a living there, and that's what I've done.

I don't share your affinity for the film. I know Toke much better, and I think he felt the same as his comments about the film were more about disappointment than satisfaction. He saved his kindest comments for the producers, whom he heard nothing positive. I never made it a point to meet the Toke's personally for the film, and the name by which he spoke of it was "Crock" as in "a crock of shit" if you'll pardon my expression.

Made in California



Demented

Arthur Jeffreys (and Alex Rebur - unconfirmed) (1981)

100 mins, 16mm

Linda Rogers (Sallee Elyse aka Sallee Young) recuperates at her country home after a nervous breakdown brought on by a rape. Her husband Matt (Bruce Columbia, Harry Reems), is being a mistress (Linda) (Linda) who demands his attention and when Linda is at her most fragile (left alone, she suffers visits from four masked youths invading her house and threatening other sexual assaults. They can't be the same attackers, because the four were caught and imprisoned. So are these new attacks real or are they all in her mind?

Linda kicks off like one of those 'History of Rape' loops on Alpha (Blue Archives) a woman feeding horses in a stable is set upon by four stocking-masked rapists who subject her to a fuck in the straw. The presence of Harry Reems, all flares 'I am' (as the husband) and fresh from such treasures as *Get Fish and Forced Entry* further signifies porno-extremity, although the remainder of *Demented* stays firmly within the constraints of Reems' horror. (Reems appeared in some of the porno industry's 'scariest' and 'scariest' movies, but he is also a decent movie actor - those line readings are easily up to scratch for the horror genre.)

Demented, sad to say, sags badly in the middle, turning into a sick usre marita drama with a rape-and-madness chapter. What's more, I found myself asking the put-upon heroine (Linda) a hell-squaky hysterical make it difficult to sympathise with her. Matt disappears for the second half of the film, leaving Linda and a four grossly unpleasant but under-characterised teenagers to hold our attention. At least sluts go to die (er) (er) raises a few miles during away scenes in her boudoir (she can hardly wait to have his organ) before asking, 'How much more did

100 mins, 16mm

People who think that *I Spit on Your Grave* is misogynistic enough to look at *Demented*, and ask themselves if *I Spit on Your Grave*'s unflinching realism isn't by far preferable to such a coy infection. *Demented* is basically a sillier, less skilled and confrontational version of Mier Zalek's classic (there's even a

caption: 'The rape' - the character is going to his death and trying to turn his actions. In this case, the recipients of the heroine's vengeance aren't the original rapists, but since they've donned masks and escorted around Linda's house terrorizing her knowing that she was raped before, frankly they deserve all they get. But with sympathy at least theoretically stacked up for the character, it at times pieces in the final reel. Sallee Young's weakened heroine is a disappointment in the long work. *I Spit on Your Grave* does it so much better by making the heroine mostly mute in the latter stages, whereas here, by the time Young has lumbered through her faux-crazy whack for ten minutes, you begin to wonder if the intruders haven't suffered enough.

Scriptwriter Alex Rebur also wrote David *The Last House on the Left* (1980) and involved him into directing. To all a *Goodnight* little is known about Arthur Jeffreys, which makes it wonder if maybe he was a porno director trying to work overground. *Demented* is his only known credit, so perhaps he later returned to a pseudonymous life in the adult industry.

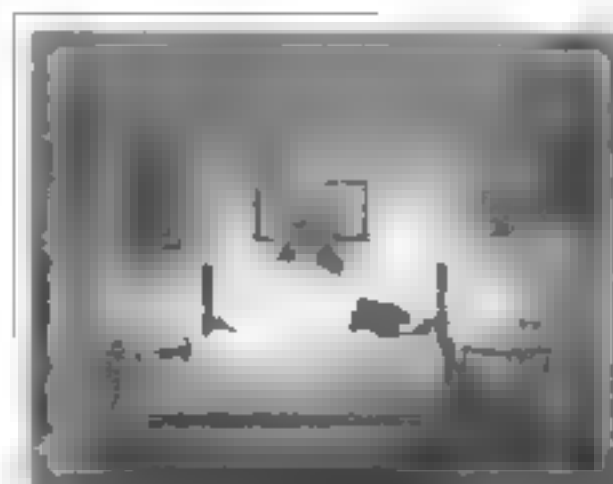
Made in: unknown

THE DEMONS OF LUDLOW

Bill Rebane (1983)

Debra Hall (Stephanie Custard) is back in her home village of Ludlow (population 47) to research its history, when the Mayor (C. Dave Davis) unveils a gift for the 200th birthday of the settler: a piano that used to belong to the village's founding father Ephram Ludlow. As soon as the piano is installed at the Community Hall, strange things start to happen: two teenagers (Michael Accardo and Mary Warden) are attacked by a demon force while making out in a barn, the church pianist's daughter (Emily Patricia Sutz) winds up strangled, and her mother's hung by the neck by her daughter's ghost. The village priest (Paul Van Housen) warns the remaining people of Ludlow that evil forces are set to wreak havoc upon them. In Ephram Ludlow's name.

Made in the same remote North Wisconsin location as Lammert's *The Devil's Own Terror* and with a few of the same actors, Rebane's variation on Lammert's supernatural revenge fails to emulate its style. Lammert used autumn leaves and witchery to lend his film an almost pagan feel, but Rebane, a native of the area



is unable to pull theme and location together. It begins well, with wonderful snowhaunt exteriors that serve to emphasize Ludlow's isolation. It's just a shame they weren't used more consistently. Maybe Rebane's crew were underdog in short-meltdowns in the freezing Wisconsin winter. Instead, we're served a succession of dull scenes lacking in dynamism, filmed in the sort of interiors even novel designers would reject as cruel and unusual punishment.

The priest's wife is strangled alone in her bedroom for his part in the film, like an aspiring starlet being hounded by the director but lidded away from the rest of the cast. Rebane squanders his story with much wandering back and forth, and the many minor incursions of the supernatural—levitating chairs, doorknobs turning, flaming tree-stumps—are so boring it's a wonder anyone notices. The haunted man is an idea with potential, but it's ruined when someone plays the "Lamin" thing, because it sounds like a synthesized hornsichord. A group of elderly Christians and an old woman play what sounds like a Bau Rick Wakeman composition as close to genuinely weird as the film ever gets, especially since the piano—white with gold trim—looks like it belongs in a Louisiana whorehouse. For the truly persistent, there are a few spooky splinters of genre punishment to be had: mentally handicapped Emily's vision of a rich 18th-Century family who tear her gonads out from birth is certainly creepy, as is the scene where Ephraim Ludlow's ghostly daughter pelts Emily's mother with stones, before dead Emily slips a noose round her mother's neck so that a demon can drag her off to hell through the ceiling. (Only the rest was as action-packed as this.)

Studio work was completed at Rebane's Shooting Ranch facility in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Judging by the snowy exteriors, Rebane must have mounted this near-copycat project soon after *Heavenly Creature* was completed. Among the local actors who appear in both movies are William Dexter, who played Aaron Percussion in *The Demon of the Terror*; Phil V. in Hausner, who played the Executioner, aka Phil Bentzen; Mary Wuolen, and Deanna Hnos. Rebane himself was associate producer on *The Chocomaire Terror*.

Made in Wisconsin.

also *The Alpha Incident*, *The Giant Spider Invasion* and *Runa*. *Creature from Shadow Lake*

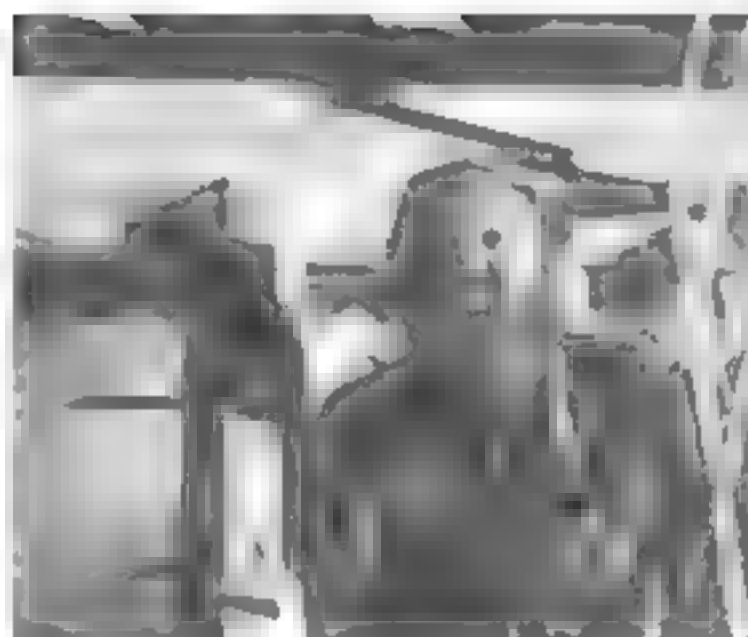
DEATH TIMES FIVE

Sean MacE (1971)
aka *People Tree*
aka *The Horrible House on the Hill*
aka *Entrance*

Rick (Taylor Caucher) and his girlfriend Julie (Joan McCann), join Rick's colleague Dr. Harvey Beckman (Samuel Bookie) and his alcoholic wife Ruth (Shelley Morrison) at a winter hideaway owned by Julie's father, Papa Doc (Gene Evans), and his wife Evelyn (Carolyn Steffert). Meanwhile, the children—David (Leo Garrett), Moe (Dawn Lynn Simer), Hannah (Lad Smiley), Brian (Tierre Turner) and Susan (Tia Thompson)—survive a road accident on the slippery roads near Papa Doc's place, and head for the house. It seems they were being transported from a mental institution, and the injured driver of the crashed vehicle is extremely anxious to stop them.

This initially staid horror-thriller takes quite a nasty turn, paying off as a nightmarish fable depicting children as amoral psychopaths and adults as their blundering, toxic-ruminating dupes. The beginning depicts a gathering of the clan, loaded over by a haughty, temperate patriarch somewhere way down the line from Big Daddy in *Car on a Hot Tin Roof*. The visiting adults tolerate bullying blowhard "Papa Doc" only because they're thirsting for a slice of his wealth, and the film initially looks as if it's going to focus on the usual grotesque power struggles within a conventional moneyed family. It's like a plot for a *Dallas* spin-off, and the acts are far from promising.

It's hard to say if the initial blandness of the film is a result of unimaginative direction or a sly teasing of the viewer's expecta-



tions. Seen twice, the menace—the early scenes is more obvious, as we witness a gang of children emerge from a minibus crash in the snowy wilds, somehow unperturbed by their brush with death. On first viewing, as the kids trek through the snow in search of habitation, it's easy to miss the subtle unease. I first took the film to be a characterless bait, the acting and mise en scene flattened out and lacking in colour. It takes time for the more unusual features of the movie to kick in. If this was a deliberate strategy by MacGregor it was high-risk: it would be all too easy to assume the film was going nowhere. It's only when the murderous children start to "play" with their "people toys" (if the film's original title, and the film's nasty streak emerges).

The only fun to be had in the first act involves a wistful woman attempting to seduce a Lenny-esque simpson, followed swiftly by a cat-fight between female rivals, complete with hair pulling and loud meow-meows on the soundtrack. This Russ Meyer-esque scene lifts the movie from dull to sleazy, but it's a relief until the plot takes another turn and we enter an entire different realm, in the form of an extended sequence shot in extreme slow motion, depicting the children bludgeoning the driver to death as he tries to prevent them making contact with the household. The soundtrack slows right down to a montage of *Barbra* growls and hurried human cries, an almost stony arrangement emphasises with the childish theme tune, and the image is reduced to a succession of still shots. This weirdness persists something like three minutes, the director is at last thinking well, outside, he has.

"Don't you think there's something strange about the kids?" asks Julie. Well, for a start there are some very disconcerting vibes emanating from 11-year-old child star Leo Garrett in the role of David. He fixates on Harvey, a hen-pecked hubby unable to tempt his contemptuous wife into sex. David's intense concentration steers us shy of a seduction, a very weird as near the knuckle twist in a film like this. "Can a girl change colour," he says, stroking a woman's jersey on the bed in Harvey's room. "Don't you think it goes with me, ever?" It turns even kinkier as the boy stares into a bedroom mirror, puts on a wig, ear-rings and lipstick belonging to Harvey's wife, and murmurs, "You're all mine, Harvey Beckman!" (a questionable taste, perhaps, but I think this scene shows what the film while ultimately lacks. If each of the children had chosen an adult whom to concentrate, it would have given the film a back to a more resonant way to explore tensions between children grown-ups. Each of the five killer kids could have embodied a different facet of inter-generational dynamics, with Garrett taking revenge for the sexually abusive side of adult-child relations. What in the Garrett bedroom scene amounting to "I met the idea that children seduce adults into sex crime in frequent self-cannibalizing sex offenders?" There are a few opaque allusions—run prematurely nunnish Sister Hannah to suggest prior grudges, and the military discipline of Brian, the black child,

NOT SINCE
"VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED"
HAS DEATH BECOME SO SAVAGE
OR SURVIVAL SO HOPELESS!

DEVIL TIMES FIVE

with GENE EVANS • SORREL BOOKE
SHELLY MORRISON

JORDAN WANK
A GARR'S ERA PRODUCTION

R RESTRICTED

mercilessly neatly with his murder of the (white) family patriarch. "I've got me one big papa bear," he announces, wrapping the old man's body with a sword ripped to the front of a child's swing, but it's not enough to prevent the ensemble becoming a bit of a blur. Garrett's fixation on Harvey seems simply gratuitous, because the script chickens out (if you excuse the term) and neglects to make the man a paedophile. Of course, if you think about the use of child actors in such a black-hearted context, the film is already as kink enough.

"I was just wondering when the beer commercial is going to come on," says cynical, drunken Ruth when the adults gather to discuss the murderous kids. I know what she means: people are dying left right and centre but the young never quite shakes off the coarseness of a TV drama. At times the out-there theme of the movie and the undeniable creepiness of the young actors, takes the film by the throat, but it keeps slipping back to something with the atmosphere of a slightly grubbier *Halloween*. The kids and in-

terwurst are excellent. A tighter script and more urgent acting from the adults would have made this into a classic.

Screenplay by *The Hollywood Reporter*, the screenplay is written by actor John Durren from a book by Scott MacGregor. Shooting began in March 1973. MacGregor had previously directed a feature-length documentary called *Home* (1968) about Washington D.C. *The Train of Broken Treaties*. He also came up with the original story idea for *The Brotherhood of Satan* (1970). *Devil Times Five* was his last film. Pierre Fournier worked as an actor in films and TV before coming to stunt work, knocking up over sixty credits including regular stunts as a stuntman for *Indiana Jones* in films such as *What Dreams May Come* (1998) and *Twelve Hours* (2001). Chief among the kids of course is Lefty Garrett, a seventies teenybop idol whose music career began in 1977 and continues, minus the international domination, to this day. He appears here alongside his sister Dawn Lynn, who plays Moe.

Made in California.



DOCTOR GORE

J.G. Pat Patterson 1972
aka *The Body Shop*

Plastic surgeon Doctor Jim Brandon (J.G. Patterson) loses his beloved wife Anita (Jenny Driggers) in a tragic accident. With his faithful hunchbacked assistant Gregory (Roy McHaffey), the grief-crazed doctor lures young women back to his lab using his hypnotic powers, so that he can create a new woman. But Brandon is a rising chauvinist, and love does not go smoothly.

If ever you wanted proof that the horror genre didn't immediately change its spots after George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, you need only watch Pat Patterson's *Doctor Gore* to see his death-throes of the old order, played out in a kitsch-meets-parody format. Patterson's requirements for making a *Frankenstein* rip-off seem to have come down to a lot of props: the focus on lab appointments at the expense of story and character interaction reminds me of John Cleese's man doctor in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, presiding over a birth but disinterested in anything except *the machine that goes 'Pong'*.

Doctor Gore is silly, shoddy and very very slow. Great leaps of plotting suggest numerous missing scenes – but believe me, you're grateful they're not included: anything to speed things up! If you amplified the technical shortcomings of Patterson's film ratcheted the weirdness past the point of no return, and rattled through the incomprehensible storyline at top speed, you might just get some fun out of it. I say this to stress what's really wrong here – *Doctor Gore* plods, and its basic idea is so hackneyed there's nothing to look forward to. The concept harks back to an older idiom, while attempting to 'update' it with blood and nudity – what *Flesh for Frankenstein* would have been without Paul Morrissey's mordant intelligence (and Carlo Ponti's money). Patterson, a stage-magician and spook-show dobbler who wandered into film production, plays the lead role himself, revealing a whole new set of limitations to add to his directorial ones. Swathing the soon-to-rise monster with buckfoil is an odd touch – inspired, perhaps, by Al Adamson's *Brillat of Binkley*, and

you have to acknowledge the attempt to mimic Arthur Edison's tilted angles and shadowy photography from the James Whale original, but it simply doesn't work. At least the bloodshed is copious, and clearly provoked by the Southern drive-in successes of Patterson's friend and associate Herschell Gordon Lewis. Patterson's skills as a stage magician ensure some fairly convincing severed limb illusions: it's just a shame he doesn't know how to put them in a context where we give a damn about what's going on. If you're in good company, and drunk as a skunk, the gruesome bits might be enough to get you through, but as for the rest, forget it. Considered unclassable at the time under its original title *The Body Shop*, and thought lost for many years, *Doctor Gore* is perhaps not the best epitaph for a man whom colleagues regarded as charming and supportive (see interview with Frederick Friedel). A better way to remember him is as director, writer and producer of *The Electric Chair* (1975), a far more creditable Southern-bred drama about the murder of two adulterous lovers (a priest and a trucker's wife) and the subsequent trial of the murder suspect. It wastes too much time on court-room chit-chat but it's streets ahead of *The Body Shop*, and it's worth seeing for an intense execution scene, shot in a County Prison facility with a genuine 'Old Sparky'.

Made in North Carolina

DON'T ANSWER THE PHONE

Robert Hamner 1979
aka *The Hollywood Strangler*

Author-loving, incest-fanatic Kirk Smith (Nicholas Worth) issues. To relax, he strangles young women, or phones a radio chat-show hosted by psychologist Dr Lindsay Cate (Linda Blair), posing as a Mexican with psychotic tendencies. Gradually, Kirk moves in on Dr Cate herself, killing one of her patients before turning up for a personal consultation.

This aggressive, tasteless slasher movie would love to piss you off, especially if you harbour liberal sensitivities regarding the exploitation of women. Watching it is like bumping into a troublesome drunk in a bar: you just know it's looking for a fight. Even the music is paroxysmally, gluttingly sleazy: instead of underlining tension it synchs up perfectly with the killer's snarling attitude. Made in 1979, *Don't Answer the Phone* was shot as *The Hollywood Strangler*, and so concentrates on that particular murder method rather than axes, knives, bear-hooks etc. Plot-wise, we're in the sub-genre of murder tales that reveal the identity of the killer right from the start, alongside John Peyser's *The Centerfold Girls* (1974), Jay Herwick's *Hatch Hike to Hell* (and, most notably, William Lustig's *Maniac* (1980) starring Joe Spinell, with which it has some telling similarities. Chief among these is the depiction of the killer as a sweaty, paternally abused paranoid sleazebag, frequently seen alone in his apartment, boasting and preening, or collapsing into waves of self-pity. Both men are, let's say, on the heavy side too – Spinell's maniac is an overweight slob and Worth's is a flabby but bulgishly muscled keep-fit nut. They even share the same day-job: when they're not out raping and strangling, they're scouting for business as downmarket fashion photographers.

The first thing you notice about *Don't Answer the Phone* is altitude: initially it's just the dialogue between cops assigned to a case – which apes the hard-boiled cynicism of dime-store crime novels, as in the following banter: "Did you get a shot of the 'bore'?" "Yeah, one – she's got two you know." "The 'nurse' taken off 'goddamn' – it all feels quite self-aware, by which I'd guess has been anticipated. "The last thing I need right now is a 'comedian,'" snarls Lt. McCabe (James Westmoreland), and might agree, given the severity of the film's subject matter. But comedian we get, as the director slips us a queasy mixture of sleaze, black humour and outright nastiness. Where it differs from *Maniac* is the prevailing attitude of a wino-up perpetrated by the filmmakers: a superior sense of liberal-hating wit, amplified by the malevolent glee with which Nicholas Worth embraces the role of killer.



Doctor Gore is the title that was used for the re-released version of *The Body Shop*

1. Last page top
2. Scene from *Don't Answer the Phone* that's missing from the censored UK video print

© 1999
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© 2001
© 2002

Made in New York City and New Jersey

Vide in L. cub.

Value in € absolute

slightly 'uncomplicated' acquaintance Johnny (John Cissner) with a girlfriend, sending him off on a wild goose chase to a random address. Their jolly jape goes awry though, when the odd lady who actually lives there, Mary June Wilson, accidentally

*I've got my husband's pistol out and I certainly want to hurt anybody like "As the funerals presided over by actor Jim Hurrell, the conniving doctor from S.F. Brownrigg's *Don't Open the Door*., Johnny's mother puts a cryptic curse in three. Seven days later, Dave is hit by a car. Another seven days go by, and Frank is fretting over the curse's meaning while a plane journey. He falls into conversation with Father Duane Bob (unseen) in the next seat. *Do you believe in the natural* asks Frank. *I'm one of them people with a natural bias, he's a good boy, one who knows all the answers.* Father Duane replies. Frank spills his woes, and one is resistibly reminded of the scene in *Airplane!* where an old lady mutters wildly during a fellow passenger's interminable lecture. *Strange things happen to all of us* offers the priest obitu. Departing the plane at its next stop, Father Duane looks back to see a fire-flash in the sky. Two down, one to go. I wonder Randy's skydiving hobby will play a part in his demise?*

or the second story it's sick-hockey time. *I have and have had dreams and butterflies back and forth across Saratoga, there are one man-child and one man-child's dog, on their way to quiet, soul-shattering rendezvous with darkness.* (To be sure, this is just the sort of sentimental guff that would appeal to likes of Steven Spielberg, who, with the whole of the Twilight Zone to explore, serves us a plate of heart-warming creep about revitalized masters in *Twilight Zone: The Movie*). A Kevin Richerly) searching the woods for his missing di

ids a hole in the ground from which smoke and strange moans emerge. (A hippy commune? Charlie Manson? Unless again, an seekers. Running back inside, he informs his stolid, working-class father (Robert Hutton, and kitchen-bound, picture-book mother (played by leading light of the S.F. Brownrigg rep company, Annabelle Weenick). A posse is summoned (including Charlie Dell, of Brownrigg's *Poor White Trash Part 2*), but the men hesitate to explore the hole. Eventually the boy's father decides to climb down. At which point we should get some

... in, right? You must be joking. Dad emerges from the hole and goes running off into the trees, raving mad. End of story, not even a claw seen poking from the earth... Annabelle Weenick's far too good for this material, and here she has little to do, at times responding to the dearth of interesting dialogue by miming the manner of a silent movie actress. There's little else to add except to mention the use of a library music cue familiar from the tender scene in *Down of the Heart*.

the third segment begins with Serling in high metaphorical-metaphysical mode. *There is a bridge in our mind that leads through time and memory from what we know to shores beyond knowing. It spans high above the canyons of our disbelief like a spectral span spun by devils for us to tread. To walk this bridge is to accept all kinds of possibilities, especially the most exciting possibility of all - the possibility of impossibility.* Good Lord, surely he was kidding.

At least this last story is marginally better than the others based. Serling tells us, on a common American folk tale known in Arkansas as 'The Child on the Bridge' (in North Carolina as 'The Llama Story', in Illinois as 'Spectre of the Mills', and in ... as 'The White Rock Lady' (in deference to the director's roots, Serling favours the Arkansas moniker). Susan is played by Rosie Holmirk, leading lady in S.F. Brownrigg's classic shocker *Don't Look in the Basement*. She's joined by Brownrigg's greatest acting asset, Gene Ross (star of all four Brownrigg horror films), who plays her strict, jealous father. Holmirk's pixieish charms matches the thirties period setting; she'd have made a great Gatschviesque flapper. The story, though, is a mite connection, about Susan's forbidden trust with a lover her daddy dislikes. During the old man's anger, the couple fatally crash their car off a river. Every anniversary, a ghostly Susan latches a life back



home. But as each new Samuritan rings the doorbell to summon the sorrowful father, she disappears, leaving only a bouquet of flowers. I enjoy the cliché but such dreamlike scenes (Susan and her young beau wandering through a misty woodland into, near a fairytale house surrounded by gnarled tree-trunks and mossy ivy-cranks, especially as they're scored to a haunting & DR instrumental called 'Sleepy Shores' (a British chant hit for the Johnny Pearson Orchestra in 1971, thanks to its use as the theme for the 1968 *Love Me*).

Ye remain baffled by the power of rational thought ignites the script, by the sudden surges of creativity. Such honesty is refreshing, but it's counteracted by the film's refusal to bow out gracefully. Once the third story has jumped to a close, Thomason needlessly drags things out by repeating bits of earlier footage while the final voice-over (not Serling's) recaps and theorizes incoherently. *"The dear departed who do not quite depart. Why can't they let go?"* - as if reading our impotent minds. *"Is it because we can't let go of them?"* Is our love the anchor that holds some part of them near? Frankly, no.

Harry Thomason was an Arkansas high school football player who got the movie bug. His other movies include *Season of Fear* aka *So Sad About Winter* (1973), *The Day It Came to Earth* (1979), and *Revenge of Bigfoot* aka *Rufus J. Pickett and the Indian* (shot in 1978, released in 1979). He and his wife Linda later developed and produced the successful American sitcoms *Designing Women* (1986-93) and *Evening Shade* (1990-), the latter draws from Thomason's own experiences as a footballer and starring Matt Keayakus. Cinematographer turned director James Roberson (*Superstition*) worked with Thomason several times. Lighting man Robert Dracup was yet another regular from the Brownrigg stable. (Ever there was a doubt as to Brownrigg's prowess, it's extinguished by the failure of Thomason to guide the cast and crew when here



The US video sleeve for *Encounter on the Unknown* promises at least a taste of past The Twilight Zone

Robert Powell as Dracula vs. The
 Francis as The
 Dracula vs. Frankenstein



THE EVIL

1981 Trinkus 1978

aka *Chr. Demon*

aka *House of Evil*

The Vargas mansion, built by Old Vargas himself over an ancient sulphur pit in what the Indians called the Valley of the Devils, has stood empty since the early '900s. "Breathermen arrived; ended about the time the house was finished - died out like he put a seal on it..." Cue the present day, and husband-and-wife science team Carl and Caroline Arnold (Richard Crenna and Joanna Pettit) are moving in, sprucing up the place as a reliable, warm home for recovering drug addicts. With these new arrivals debunk the house's spookshow rep? And what could possibly scare a bunch of tough inner-city drug-bonds?

"Haven't you noticed that since the house closed in on us, the whole place smells of sulphur?" *The Evil* is a Stephen King wannabe, boiled from the stewed bones of the home-movie horror buckbusters. "Just suppose that over the years this house could suck up some of the natural power around it," muses one character, whose job it is to cue a blatant steal from *The Shining*. Of course King himself was hardly a bolt from the blue (as he would happily agree, being wise to the genre's history). In *The Evil*, just as in *Salem's Lot* or *The Shining*, the genre's many clichés are in evidence: spirits that only a sensitive female can see, cobwebs and dusty diaries, scared dogs picking up on an underlying evil, thunder and lightning, Indian legends... But unlike King's novels, *The Evil* fails to reupholster these mould-bewhiskered furnishings. The problem is not so much the lack of originality. It's the editing, which goofs the rhythm and fumbles tension. For example, after a young man is electrocuted by a falling cable, the shutters, doors and windows close of their own accord, sealing the exits. We then cut to a character saying, "Let's get the hell out of here." Excusing the *Scrachy-Door* dialogue, it would surely have been a more dramatic play to insert the line before the shutters close? That way the house closes the avenue of

escape in defiance of the victims' words. As it is, the character just seems slow-witted. A simplistic slasher film like *Friday the 13th* makes even its false alarms frightening, and its murders convulsively exciting. *The Evil* fails this basic requirement.

Tension is also squandered between those who believe in the supernatural and those who disbelieve by giving the group irrefutable proof of the spooks too easily. A scene between professor Richard Crenna and student (Andrew Prince) at least aims for a little drama, as spook-freely Prince challenges his sceptical mentor to approach the haunting with the open-mindedness for which he is renowned. As if to punish the upstart student, soon after this confirmation Prince slices his own hand off at the wrist with a circular saw. Talk about Freudian... Works of art the script fails to capitalise on what could have been its most interesting angle - the tension between druggies and doctors - saving the addicts' access to the supernatural, unlike their square and unmisgiving counsellors, would at least have given the film some satirical bite. Unfortunately, these poor lambs are the least convincing smack-heads and speed-freaks you'll ever see. They even fail the genre's elementary roller requirements: the Arnold cure must really be something.

For the climax of the movie, Christian imagery is trotted out to validate the irrational. At least it incorporates a genuinely weird scene with Victor Buono as The Devil forcing an atheist to believe in God, a scene that puts the film in the Jesus Army wing of the genre, along with *The Exorcist* and, er, *Catuchism* (I'll only go so far to the latter, personally). It's (or isn't) too late, though, and *The Evil*, though watchable, is damned to genre purgatory destined forever to be an also-ran, and surely no one's secret indulgence.

Scriptwriter Donald (Galen) Thompson also wrote *Superstition* for James Roberson. The story is similar, but Roberson is a more stylish director than Trinkus and turns in the better film. Gus Trinkus started out as a dancer, playing 'Action' in the original production of *West Side Story*. He was married to Goldie Hawn but divorced in 1974. Trinkus's second film was *Swinging Barmaids* starring Dyanne Thorne, a story about a religious out-killing waitresses at a sexy bar. The Vargas house is perhaps a loose reference to *Touch of Evil*. Trinkus shot *The Evil* in New Mexico, and Vargas is the name of the Mexican character Charlton Heston plays in the Welles film (although Welles actually shot his Mexican border scenes in Venice, Los Angeles). Production on *The Evil* was first mooted in *The Hollywood Reporter* in July 1976, when it went under the name of *Chr. Demon*, although it was not released until 1978.

Made in New Mexico

FATAL GAMES

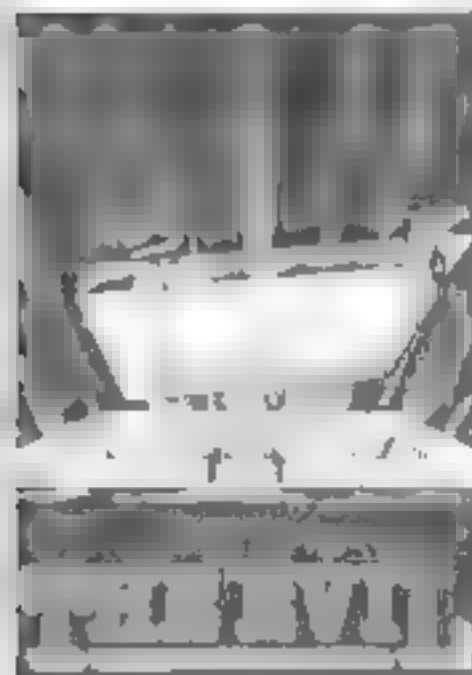
Michael Ball (1983)

aka *The Killing Touch*

aka *Olympic Nightmare*

Here's a light but engaging rarity for lovers of early 1980s slasher movies. It's definitely an also-ran, but fans will relish that warm glow of familiarity as the clichés are put under starter's orders. Athletes at a sports college are being stalked and speared by a cageous-clad nut. Future Olympic hopefuls disappear from their courses, one by one, but no one seems to suspect foul play. Perhaps one of the faculty is harbouring a grudge against the students? Or is one of the students just not a team player?

"Predictable?" guess so. "Politically incorrect?" Guilty as charged. "Formularised?" Oh, sod it. I can't wear this sackcloth any longer, if connoisseurs of black-and-white horror films can wax rhapsodic at some daffy old Lugosi film, I can surely indulge a sentimental moment for this tacky eighties slasher! *Fatal Games* is never going to be hoisted on fans' winning shoulders and taken for a lap of honour, but personally, I have a weakening affection for its clumsy hop, skip and jump. And it's better than its nearest sibling, *Graduation Day*. A warning though: the reason this flick has no chance of winning a medal is that the violence is neither





acted not explicit enough. The killer spears each victim with a meaning there are no amusing variations to look forward to, focus between the teeth paying?) The real fun comes with the talking scenes, as the killer hampered by that unwieldy choice of weapon, chases victims around the faculty, no doubt wishing to have chosen something more practical, an ax, or a hammer. And you have to watch when a star swimmer is javelined from beneath the water's surface, a feat requiring extraordinary muscle-power and an even greater perversity on the part of the killer, who could easily have speared the deed from above. There's a surprising amount of nudity, but of course, including a few full-frontals, and some sexual innuendo, although it's hardly what you'd call progressive. Of the cast, the only one I recognised was Nicholas Love, the retarded brother in Cliff Lammell's excellent fright flick *Bugel Man*. The director, Michael Elliot, seems to have disappeared after this movie, but never mind, this sort of thing is your amateur playground, the slower movie is more sport than art, and Elliot gets good points from me for completing the course without sending me to sleep.

Made in California.



FIEND

1972, 100 min, R

aka: *Witch*, *Witcher*

A demon possesses a corpse, which rises from the grave and sucks the life-essence from an amorous couple making out in the graveyard. Thus reincarnated, the dead but too arrogant Mr Longfellow (Don Liefert) sets up in a quiet suburb of Baltimore. After violin tuition from his home. Meanwhile local resident Gary (Richard Nelson) suspects that the outsider might be connected to a string of murders that have recently plagued the neighbourhood.

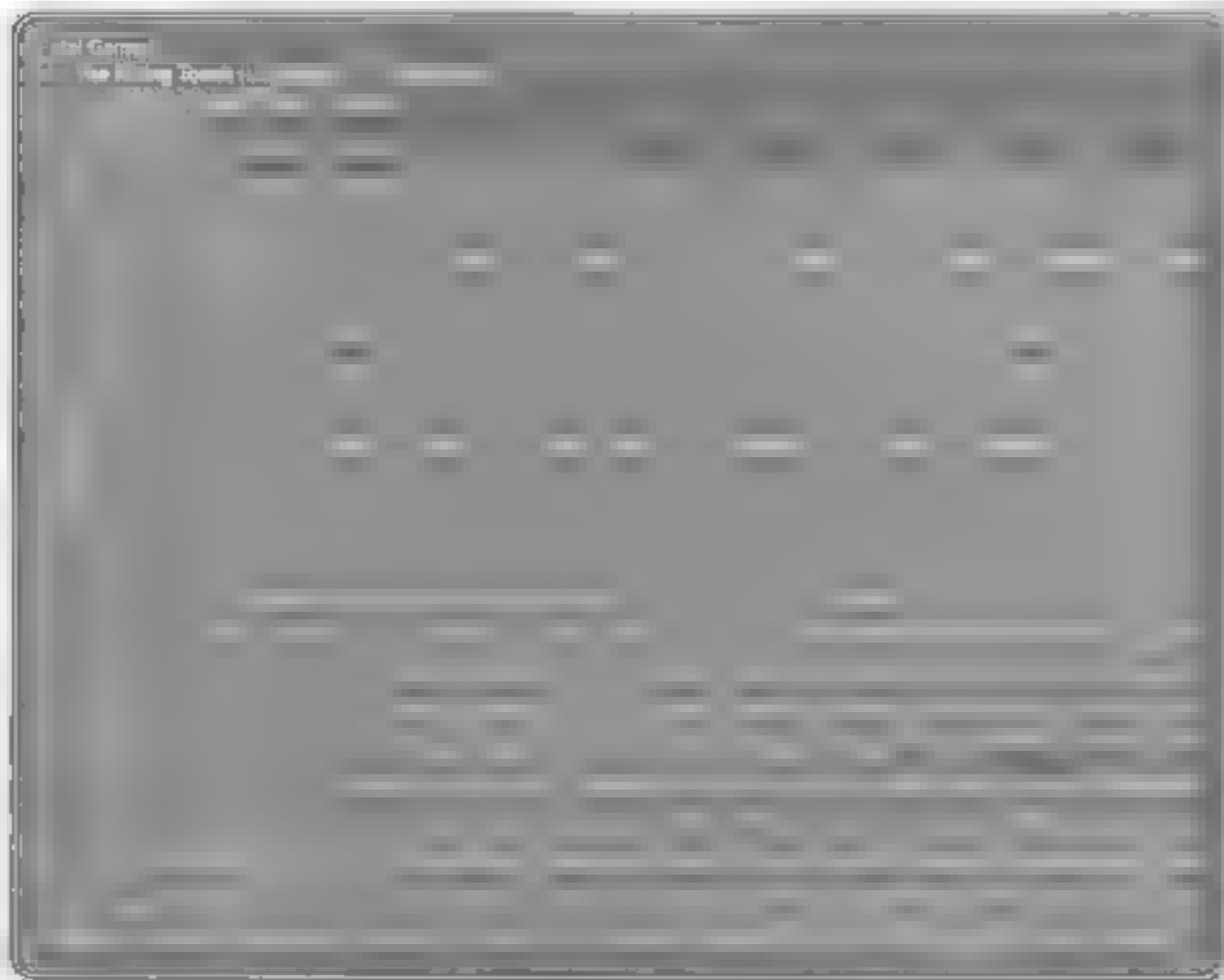
Despite a bumpy start and some terribly over-extended dialogue scenes, I find I like Don Dohler's *Fiend*, it may even be his best film, which is ironic, since it was designed as an emergency stop-gap when production was temporarily halted. In Dohler's sophisticated monster flick, *Night Beast*, the big advantage this time, in the absence of *The Alien Factor*'s fabulous monsters, is the central role given to Don Liefert, who plays the eponymous Fiend with the sort of airy grandiosity Vincent Price would have loved. It is fair to say that, acting-wise, Liefert is the saviour of Dohler's film, his roles as Zachary in *The Alien Factor*, the vicious biker in *Night Beast*, and Mr Longfellow in *Fiend*, put him head and shoulders above the rest of Don's repertory. In fact he slightly overbalances *Fiend*, by making Longfellow far more compelling than Gary, the nosy neighbour hero, an irony Don makes perfect sense in the rest of the genre, but which in Dohler's straight-faced universe is akin to Puzuzu winning Ruan's soul.

"Kinda cold and damp down here isn't it?" asks Gary, who insists on a guided tour of Longfellow's cellar after a girl is found dead behind his house. "I prefer it that way," sneers Liefert, in the tones of a nobleman forced to explain his taste in furnishings to a visiting humpkin. In a classic Dohler exchange, Gary seems to find this lack of interest in home improvement "in your opinion, the kitchen is just make it a lot more comfortable, don't you think?" suspicious in itself. The tension is ramped up by the feeling that we're witnessing not so much a war of nerves as a meeting of monstrosities. The hero looks like a reluctant caterpillar, while Longfellow's facial fungus could signify villainy from half-a-mile away (it's all you can do not to huss the screen when he sneezes).



top left From Fatal Games, "insert your own jokes about getting the point here"

bottom left The



Lelfert is not the only asset, though. Doherty's direction is a shade more accomplished here than his debut. There's a greater sense of scope in the location shooting. It's amazing what a trip to the supermarket can do, and a number of smoothly executed tracking shots are hiving in the produce lot. However, the editing is quite choppy to begin with, as if Doherty was searching for atmospheric images which he then had difficulty assembl[ing] for practical shots of tree branches against the sky (yet awkwardly inserted). If the plot seems to hinge on rather too many murders of women walking through woodland, then at least there's a pleasingly seasonal chill to the scenery (*Friend* was shot in the early spring of 1981). Pacing, though, is still a problem, wanting for the plot to reach a conclusion involves the viewer's attention in a battle between curiosity and cynicism. The movie is generally successful in its pulpish way, but why, when Cary complains about the villain's noisy violin tutorials, doesn't Doherty use a real violin on the soundtrack? A bit of library music or a public domain classical clip would surely have been far more effective than the awful synthesiser which takes its place. Least valuable are the primitive and largely unnecessary optical effects intended to show an ancient supernatural evil possessing the villain: they serve only to shroud some otherwise effective editing-like appliances. Nevertheless, *Friend* is another film to cement Doherty's status as the little man in horror cinema it's time to like **Don Lelfert on *Friend***

Don, a person for who I have much respect, was a gifted editor. I think he saved his films in the editing room. His personal favourite was Friend. Friend was tough on me. I was undergoing a painful divorce, drinking heavily. I'm actually interested in a few minutes of footage and the makeup was downright painful. Later was told to pull the skin under my eyes as soon as possible, thus exposing the sensitive areas under the eyes to the climate when we shot outside. As I'm fair-skinned and had on a hat, the makeup caused my skin to break out and I had to go to a dermatologist. There were a few days when everyone was ready to shoot and I refused to get into makeup. The mere thought of applying it sickened me.

**Made in Maryland,
also *The Alien Factor* and *NightBeast***

FIGHT FOR YOUR LIFE

Robert Minkoff 1977

See interview with Robert Minkoff

Made in New York City

FINAL EXAM

Sammy Huston (1981)

In the introduction to this book I made the rather extreme assertion that I would happily watch a twenty-four-hour slasher film (also admitted here for some unspeakably perverse I often find myself wishing the early stages would go on for before the murders begin. It's sick I know, and I apologise for using this book as a confessional booth, but there it is. At least it's a warning to the rest of you. Slasher films can really fuck you up.

Final Exam however proved something to me that the rest of you probably knew already: even if the pre-slaughter stages are fun, you can't just dispense with the nasty stuff altogether. At some point, no matter how late, gardening tools or serrated cutlery must make graphic contact with teenage flesh. *Final* is so much up to begin with that it's painful to see how far short it ultimately falls. After two sketchy killings in the opening

as per usual, we expect no more than a brief splash of violence. But Jimmy Huston takes fifty precious minutes to get to the next murder, filling up the time with a blissful array of eminently discernible characters. Numerous fraternity jocks and sweetish nerds have ritualised conversations on airhead chick (Sherry White-Burch agonises about whether her new boyfriend (Terry Warren) takes her seriously, a sweet-natured student clearly marked out as 'the final girl' (Cecile Baguado) tries to advance her education while dispensing aid to her room-mates. It's all coming together perfectly. El Niño numero uno (Joel S. Rice) even has one-sheeters for *The Corpse Crenders* and *The Teatime Murders* on his wall, kindly pointing out who our surrogate is. Thanks, guys. The campus troublemaker (and repressed homosexual) is capped Wildman (Ralph Brown) and he and his crazy-ass Gamma Fraternity buddies cut loose with stunts such as dragging a freshman to a tree, stripping him to his underpants, smothering his torso in shaving cream and pouring ice-cubes in his crotch. Mind you, they also take a solemn slaughter by driving their black van onto campus, shooting stooge students dead with machine-guns, and then driving off with the corpses! which was impressive, I have to admit. The wash local cop (Sam Kilman) gets bent out of shape about it, but the school's cheery coach (Jerry Rushing, a regular for Worth Keeter and creepy caretaker R.C. Nanney) take a more serene view (something tells me that this gag would meet with more disapproval post-Columbine) and for the same reason I doubt you'll ever see this film on American TV.

So *Final Exam* is heading for straggle. As. Then the killings begin, and the movie tanks. Huston skimps on the blood, hides the attacks in shadows and medium shots, and neglects to deliver even the simplest of prosthetic wound appliances. It's deep unsatisfying and very disappointing. The killer (Timothy Raynor) doesn't even have a signature weapon, and the absence of close-up stabbing, slicing or crushing really breaks the contact with the audience. (There's a moderately successful death by weight-training apparatus, I suppose, but it was all done so much better in *Happy Birthday to Me*). The North Carolina-based Ear Owensby empire bankrolled this in 1980, which is before the MPAA clamped down hard on gory horror, so the only reasons can see for circumspection are either lack of money for special make-up, or the director's basic dislike of the gory stuff. If the former, well, even cheap gore effects are better than n[on]e; the latter perhaps Mr. Huston, whose real forte would seem to be action drama (e.g. *Death Driver* and *Blackstone Canyon Prison*) should have passed the production to fellow Owensby Worth Keeter, who would probably have been more willing to spill the red stuff.



THE FOLKS AT REFSCHIE'S

JULY 1977

and Torrey Branch

Кли 7:30-8:00 старт #149. 30.06.2019

4.1.1. *Types of R_1 of M w.r. \mathcal{F}_0*

and T -free at the R -level, both form

[illegible]

up with lots of home-baked food they slaughter duck and eat their
share. We prime cuts with the re

comes Regina, Linda Ellen, who believes she has not a penny hidden at the Smiths' residence. There she she found a newspaper

[illegible]

He will come back single from the time of her return.

In a country renowned for its jungle panthers, it was inevitable but Ford would make an appearance in the collective imagination of American cinema kicking off from a very unlikely premise.

Drop every disc " " " "

11 And I even remember entering and the piano
12 played now! It's so better than a satire send-up.

rotation suggests. A hooker trailer emphasizing the buxom possibilities sells the film she's not a hooker, she's a hooker.

as far as dubbing Philip and circumstances over an elaborate

ideas. For instance, a succession of glissandos (non-verbal sounds)

are placed unsettlingly high in the sound-mix, where they look on old Evelyn's face when her diner cheerfully announces: *Fu-*

Half an α μg is more than enough!

In horror movie terms, *Quintaburger* was the local son of—seventies, with *The Exorcist* and *Satan's School for Girls* as the best possible

comparing. But few actors might not deserve as many Michelin stars as Tobe Hooper, but he *did* get there first, serving a weird

unsettling acquired taste akin to Laurence Harvey's *The Girl on the Train* (1974). Granted, plausibility is what he sells, as he

the film is strong suit, the heroine is not particularly subdued when she finally learns the truth, and the intermittent whimsicality

completely puzzled by a rendition of *The White Cliffs of Dover*.

...at the end of the trial, it matches up with the use of the gear's Primar and Circumstance. I suppose ... but to what end? The latter is

played during LBJ college graduation ceremonies, but can think of no American relevance for the latter. [He says it] he isn't as

It is a head-scratcher, a one-of-a-kind with an unusual top-sided feel, and

the many of the more curious horrors of the sci-fis at 'leaves
 & ... into the usual genre pigeonholes.

Producer Michael Macready previously in paydirt with *Empire*, while Townsend previously contributed *Eightmen*.

10. Hux (1964) to the genus, before moving on to sufficient articles
 10. Huxford cited on 14 September, 1997 at the age of 76

Made in U.S.A. Formosa



Often, in the days
only way to reveal a film

creative Videodrome by  (James Elchison) for 

Exam throw light on the dem. n

If you're a skinner, w

kindly agreed to draw a picture for the July-August cover of *Terror* at Red Wolf Inn.





much aftermath, not enough violence. But apart from that, *Forest of Fear*

Forest of Fear also played in America as Toxic Zombies

and a clever under its original title. The bit, presumably with James Fenton's exuberant penis-sipping Bigfoot feature *Night of the Demon* rather than

©1987, ©1988, ©1989, ©1990



THE FOREST

Don Jones (1981)

See interview with Don Jones and Gary Kent

Made in California

FOREST OF FEAR

Charles McClann (1979)

aka *Blood eaters*

aka *Toxic Zombies*

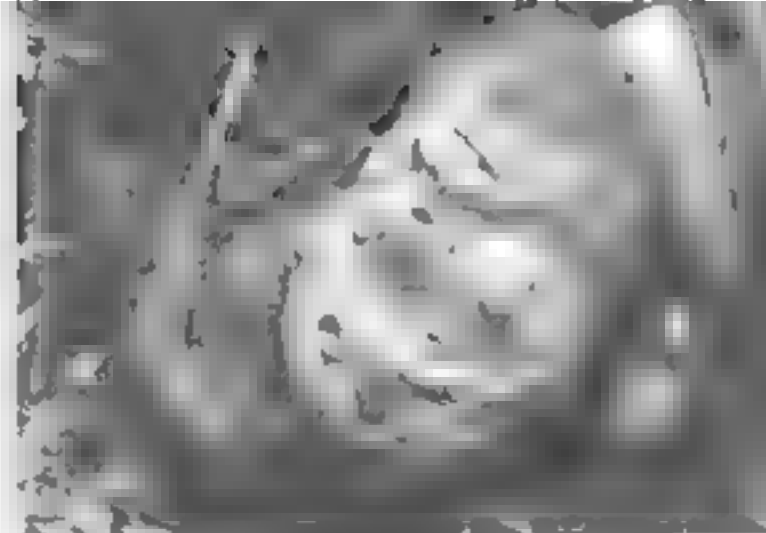
As dumb as you please, *Forest of Fear* is an okay woodland zombie romp, no more, no less. Like the films of the 1960s that addressed the multi-coloured counterculture while wearing enough establishment sockcloth to avoid being censored, *Forest of Fear* seen at a glance, tries to have it both ways, here equating stoned hippies with *zomboid* murder and running on anti-authoritarian back-story just in case it turns out the government are to blame, having paid some old-timer to spray the marijuana fields with dangerous untested pesticide (the film trades on the contemporary Panquet scare). Not that this information shifts the focus of the film that much: the rationale may run against The Man, but the bulk of the action has naive holiday-making bourgeois types attacked by pesky hippies, whose drooping mindless is made far scarier than the underlying anti-government theme. It's a classic case of heart in one place, head in the other.

Of course the truth of the matter is that when you're stoned tripping, or otherwise off your face, it's a lot more satisfying to watch your representatives foaming at the mouth and tearing chunks out of innocent squares than it is to wade through a worthy defence of the value and beauty of the drug experience. I don't know about you, but if there's one thing guaranteed to give me a bad trip, it's a dose of pro-love, hippy-dippy peace-not-war earnestness. That's why *Forest of Fear* can claim to have its finger on the fibrillating pulse of its likely audience.

So that's the tolerant side of the review: now to the rest. *Forest of Fear* basically lacks the visceral charge of its inspiration, *Dawn of the Dead*, and there's no stylistic detail or imagination to compensate. To put it bluntly, this is a movie where a bunch of nineties run around woods and fields, with the cameraman occasionally grinding to a halt to look at the *aftermath* of a zombie attack. Except for a severed hand stunt on phoney Herschel Gordon Lewis might have asked for a retake, and a couple of very fleeting bullet-to-the-head appliances, there are no advances on what you might call the action-gore front. We do see blood-spattered corpses (yawn), a severed leg (zzzzz) and a body with a pool of intestines slopped out beside it (okay, that was nice), but these are static shots with little impact. The existing face make-ups are adequate but unmemorable. Tony Maitanowski's *The Curse of the Screaming Dead*, filmed in the next field, so to speak, can boast a more grotesque vision of the dead. And David Spiering's photography is merely adequate, which is a shame given that he turned in some beautiful work the same year for Bill Lustig's *The Big Bad Man* and later shot the inventive, hyperactive *Street Trash* (1987).

Forest of Fear was shot on film as *Blood eaters*, in the Pittsburgh region, with production values on loan from George Romero's camp, so you can be forgiven for expecting more. It's particularly galling that John Amicus, the gifted, unforgettable star of Romero's *Martin* is tossed an utterly mundane part as sidekick to a hard-ass cop. It's tragic to see this teenage prodigy trudging through such a chunkless role. Amicus, I guess, must have shunned the spotlight after *Martin*, or else he'd never have sunk this far, but *Forest of Fear* is tainted by the feeling of wasted potential.

What can I say about Ted Shapiro's score? It apes both *Halloween* and, more unthinkingly, the Goblin of *Dawn of the Dead*, but even if you have a tolerance for cheap synthesizer, it's heavy going. The same uninspired arpeggios plunk away over the action perhaps intended to grind us down, they simply erode our goodwill. Music aside, there's also a lot of unconstructed female screaming to be heard, the poor actresses screeching away like tortured



scubirds. All in all, the *Forest of Fear* audio experience is definitely not recommended if you're feeling itchy.

You have to be a little bit soft in the head to stick up for this film, to even vaguely like it suggests you've spent too long pining for the early days of video, when these cheap and nasty turkeys were of the rage. What the hell, that's me on both counts. Even though the music can drive you crazier than a toxic hippy, *Forest of Fear* is a laugh. It's like a cheap frozen nutter you turn up your forehead-loving nose at it, until late one night you're pissed and starving and there's no gravadax or goat's cheese flan left in the cupboard. If at times it *is* feels like a forerunner of those fucking awful made-on-video gon-fests like *Vampire Shift* (1987), try not blame this little movie for the sins of its lack. Relax, watch some Bergman, and stay out of the low-budget woods for a while. Try to enjoy reading Adorno. You'll be back.

Charles 'Chuck' McClann's career as film stalled after *Forest of Fear* was released. A Princeton graduate in Law, he moved on to become a prominent figure in the business community as senior vice-president of the financial services conglomerate, Marsh & McLennan, with an office in the World Trade Center. McClann died in the Twin Towers terrorist attack, on 11 September, 2001. His body was never recovered.

Made in Pennsylvania





GARDEN OF THE DEAD

John Haves (1972)

See [feature on John Haves](#)

Made in California

THE GIANT SPIDER INVASION

Bill Rebane (1974)

Rebane's best film opens at quite a pace, certainly a lot faster than its follow-up, *The Alpha Incident* (1977). Nervy crosscutting gives *The Giant Spider Invasion* an almost modern feel: it could probably play on TV without embarrassment. The narrative flickers between a loveless husband and wife (Robert Easton and Leslie Parrish) whose fair land is the focus of the horror, and the rather less vivid affairs of an investigating scientific team. There's also a wise-old-but-not-sheriff Alan Hale breathing comic humour into the story – the sort of character you'd later find in Stephen King's novels. With this, and an alien invasion that reveals a town rotting from within, it's no wonder King referenced Rebane's flick warmly in his study of the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*.

The arrival of mysterious meteorites is achieved with earthquake if implausible pyrotechnics, courtesy of some brazen inane work. Early stages, as the meteorites trigger increased activity in the indigenous spider population, are as creepy as you could wish: people are constantly sneezing irritably at the air with their hands, dislodging webs in doorways, flicking spiders away from the table. A highlight involves one large spider making its way across unwashed dishes until it crawls into a blender just in time for the farmer's wife to switch it on and mix her morning Bloody Mary. Eventually, rising to the challenge of the movie's title, Rebane gallantly offers us a giant spider the size of a camper van. And it's not bad at all, though it's less obscurely disturbing than the creature that rears out from the dusty caves of a barn earlier, like a rag-doll with too many legs.

While the sheriff's cynical comments indicate a less-than-pious attitude towards the town's ongoing Christian revivalist meeting, the eventual apocalypticism is overdubbed by the preacher ranting about sin and deliverance. So are the spiders a judgement on the godless, or are the faithful, locked away in their drawn-out church meetings, being punished for their irresponsibility? Perhaps Rebane was aiming for the double whammy of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where opposing interpretations work equally well?

The scientific aspects are shameless gobbledegook, incorporating quantum physics that would flummox Niels Bohr. Looks like our black hole has turned into an open doorway from hell says one Einstein. Faced with how to rid the town of a spider the size of a Buick, another suggests, "We could slither it with...". A bit silly then, but this is basically a good, fast-paced, unpretentious monster movie of the sort that has disappeared since the big studios crowded the pitch. There's a poignant moment when the sheriff describes the giant spider saying, "Did you ever see that movie, Jaws? It makes that look



Ambassador video cover for *Frankenstein Island* was drawn by the same artist who came up with the sleeve for Richard Dass's *Crash*.

Italian locandina poster for Bill Rebane's *The Giant Spider Invasion*.



FRANKENSTEIN ISLAND

Jerry Warren (1981)

Like fifteen minutes of *The Wild Women of Wintgar*, ten minutes of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, half-an-hour of desiccated *Frankenstein*, add a caged (unironed Michael 'unwashed' and grotesque with optically composited head of John Carradine, simmering at twenty-three years and serve cold in 1981. Don't be surprised if you want a bite, what you've made is a flick that challenges A. Adamant, or stubborn retro-ism. The difference is that director Jerry Warren actually made this sort of cheesy sci-fi horror flick back in the day, when such monster-mash shenanigans were all the rage, whereas Adamant merely aped them fifteen years too late. Coming from the director of *Monsters* (1956), *The Terrifying Petrified World* (1957), *Tenage Zombies* (1959) and *Attack of the Mummy Men* (1964), a goofy flick like *Frankenstein Island* is just more of the potent Warren hallelujah: if you wanted to be grandiose, you could suggest that by making such a defiantly old-fashioned film in 1981 (year of horror hits *An American Werewolf in London* and *Scanners*), Warren was staking his final claim to the territory he helped to shape, just as Billy Wilder bid farewell to his brand of Hollywood with that grand old show-biz *Fedora* (1978).

It leaves further debate for those with fonder feelings for the movies Warren made. For me, *Frankenstein Island* offers just the mild satisfaction of having finally seen what lies behind that spectacularly awful 'Ambassador Video' cover.

Made in California and Arizona.

FRIDAY THE 13TH: THE ORPHAN

John Ballard (1977)

See [interview with John Ballard and Susan Markovitz](#)

Made in New York State.

FROZEN SCREAM

Frank Rouch and Renee Harmon (1981)

See [interview with Renee Harmon](#)

Made in California.



goldfish. Of course it was precisely the arrival of Spielberg's film that sealed the fate of cheap, small-town monster movies. As this Monsters & bigger budgets got bigger until the B-movie pool was colonised by bloated behemoths of the Hollywood variety, excluding the little fish altogether. Rehnau's valiant effort, with its scenes of local townspeople (and their children) attacking the monsters under occasionally visible floodlights was almost a divine breeze.

Made in Wisconsin.
aka The Alpha Incident, The Demons of Ludlow and Rann, The Legend of Shadow Lake

GODMONSTER OF INDIAN FLAIR

Fredric Hobbs 1973
aka interview with Fredric Hobbs and William Heyes
 Made in California.

THE GORE-GORE GIRLS

Herschell Gordon Lewis 1972
aka Blood Bys
 Someone is killing the strippers who work in Murr's Heaven, a downtown club owned by Mardone Mobius (Henry Youngman). Nancy Weston (Amy Farrow), a pretty young reporter, invites sophisticated private investigator Abraham Gentry (Frank Kress) to track down the killer and pass the exclusive story to her newspaper for a cool \$25,000. Gentry accepts the deal and sets about uncovering the murderer's identity. He eventually discovers the killer after going girl to girl (and girl to death).

When *Breakfast at Tiffany's* came along, *The Gore-Gore Girls* was Herschell Gordon Lewis's last film, and it's a wonderful send-off for the exploitation classics that made him a name. Personally I think it's his best. *The Wizard of Gore* is the weirdest, and *Two Thousand Maniacs* has the best premise but *The Gore-Gore Girls* refines the gaudy humour of *The Gruesome Girl* and then out-outrounds expectation by backing it all up with a couple of genuinely remarkable performances. Frank Kress plays Abraham Gentry as an Anaheim Jason King, with the air of a man whose arrogance is typical of a Brits who aren't cleaning chimneys and dancing on the rooftops *à la* Dick Van Dyke. His bickering relationship with reporter Nancy Weston (She's *not being clever*) "He *never*" provides the backbone of the film, ensuring that the entrails don't slide into the gutter. Lewis is a real pro at creating a sense of *Thelma* such a chore between scalpings. And although Gentry is



approach towards Nancy initially marks him as a sort of supercilious homosexual with no time for women, there's a gradual thaw between the two that may be the only believable trace of affection Lewis ever attempted.

From its jittery opening jazz theme to its chaotic climax *The Gore-Gore Girls* is a blast. It has an unusual script, loveable lead actors, insanely catchy rock'n roll instrumentals, burlesque atmosphere, bizarre guest spots (Henry Youngman?) and more sadism and mutilation than you can shake a severed leg at. The violence is pure *Grand Guignol* slapstick, but beware its nastiness can still get you ostracized. If you skip the film on a wrong party. For the killing of stripper 'Candy Kane' the murderer gets so carried away mutilating the victim's face, his face result looks like a spilled Tomato and Beef Pot Noodle. In fact the assassin actually has to reinsert a popped eyeball into the victim's pulverized visage to remind us what we're looking at! The infamous nipple-slicing (white milk from one nipple chocolate from the other) suggests the gross imaginings of a ghastly child, as does the pulverizing of a girl's buttocks with a men's tennis racket (with salt and pepper added to the resulting mess). Two face-fraying scenes compound the impression: one girl has her head shoved into a pan of deep-frying chips, and another has her features frazzled with a hot iron. It's as if two ten-year-old boys are vying with each other to think up scenes for a horror film, which makes even the nastiest moments feel somehow strangely innocent.

The Gore-Gore Girls (there's no hyphen in the onscreen title) has another sort of charm, thanks to its status as a kind of super-cheap giallo film referring to the Italian style of thriller pioneered by Mario Bava and Dario Argento. Consider the evidence: a mysterious black-coated, black-gloved maniac attacking young women; an inept police investigation upsized by the efforts of an amateur sleuth; and a handful of blatant red herrings. One wonders whether young first-time scriptwriter Alan J. Dachsman (who appears briefly as a dope-head) had recently enjoyed Argento's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970) on its US release? Even the identity of the killer, as revealed in the final scenes, bears comparison with the giallo format.

Of course there's a chauvinism in the film (despite the extreme violence I do say chauvinism, not misogyny is the issue). The relationship between Gentry and Nancy is always skewed towards male superiority, with Nancy either slavering after Gentry's attentions, or falling for his manipulations of sexual jealousy. A viewer of the feminist faith, with no warmth towards the horror genre, would doubtless be appalled by the movie, both for its sadism and its sexual politics. Lewis appears to have anticipated this, lampooning feminists in a scene where a group of them invade a strip-joint and attack the working girls.

brandishing ludicrous sloganeering banners. The killer's reason for slaughtering beautiful women (entangled in the film's plot twist) has less to do with chaos, mayhem and blood than with the fact that the film is so obviously putting the audience's chain of command to a test, it seems quite unpleasant. You mean cutting off women's heads and putting their faces in boiling oil isn't fun? You ask. Mainly enough, I'd say no. The violence in Lewis's films is so clearly intended to rile and provoke that it's best considered outside from issues of political correctness. By focusing about misogyny one is simply looking for Lewis's *stitch*. If you're the sort of person who's offended by screen violence against women, I created these extraordinarily graphic provocations just for you, putting them in the screen with a sardonic smirk. He's like a chef who puts extra chillies in your meal just to see the look on your face. Lewis has gone on record as saying that the film is intended for sophisticated audiences, and for sure it helps if you've been behind the chopping block a few times. But it's obviously part of the fun for him to offend the 'unsophisticated' and everyone who hates the movie.

It's worth noting that when Nancy gets up to dance in the paper's contest, jealous third Century is ogling another woman. Very Farrell doesn't really disrobe, even though the rest of the girls have gone cheerfully topless throughout. Many an imitation artist would have said, 'Do it topless or we get another broad.' Lewis says nothing about Farrell in *The Front Page Girls* DVD commentary (a rather unhelpful track with too much digression by the moderators), so it's unclear whether, for instance, Farrell re-used or wore her breasts at the last minute. Not much on the film was in the can. Whatever the truth, her modesty remains intact. Such would not be the case in the mid-seventies as the horror genre began to seep into the porno arena. In 1972, year of *Deep Throat*, and with porno-chic hot on his heels, Herschell finally bailed out, leaving the new frontier of sexually explicit horror to such driven and dangerous figures as Russ Davis, Shaun Costello and Zebede Cole.

Made in Illinois.

GRADUATION DAY

John Freed (1981)

When a promising high school athlete named Laura (Ruth Ann Lorenz) dies from a heart attack after winning a hundred metre sprint, a killer in a sweatshirt and fencing mask begins murdering her fellow track-and-field stars one by one. Could it be bullying coach Michaels (Christopher George), obsessed with sporting excellence? Or Laura's tough-cookie sister Anne (Patricia Richardson), a commissioned army officer who returns all the way from Guam for the funeral, despite the hostility of her aunts, uncles, father Ronald (Pat Baker - how about asshole school principal Mr. Goughone (Michael Pataki), or Laura's intense bereaved boyfriend Kevin (E. Danny Murphy)?

It's probably worth to be the winner, the title song declares as the film achieves just that, and drops dead. *These diploma winners* to the adult world. If you want to get in, you've got to pass the admission price, says Principal Goughone, who also has a little sobriety cynicism. "You're only as good as your last mistake" actor Pataki was in *Raise the Titanic* the previous year, so perhaps he well-timed this remark. Ideas seem to be gathering focus under starter's orders, and as you hibernate late for the track-and-field slaughterthon to come, you find yourself wondering 'If you're about to see the world's first anti-capitalist slasher film' Perhaps a populist critique of competition as wasteful expenditure. Goughone uses the fact that his insecure secretary 'F.J. Peaker' has a crush on him to make her work harder. Exploitation in the workplace, too! It's positively Murkin.

Well, an impossible dream perhaps, but *Graduation Day* has a very script to recommend it anyway. The undercurrent of humour is entirely redeeming what is basically a second-ranking slasher, but it makes the whole thing a lot more fun to watch. I loved the unnaïve chase during which the police officer, less fit than the



killer stops because he's suffering a stitch. (When you consider all the running that goes on in the slasher genre, it's a miracle half the victims don't die of a coronary.)

There's more running in the climax of the picture, as Anne sprints all the way across town and then crosses the sports field to sit at the opposite end, on the bleachers. The camera, perched on a much higher seat behind her, looks back over the entire stadium in the direction she came from. No one's there. She sits down and catches her breath for no more than five seconds. The next shot is the killer's POV, approaching her from just yards away. I know the slasher genre cheats with its POV menace shots, but this really takes the biscuit. It's the sort of thing that annoys outsiders to the genre and even I felt cheated. If you're a stickler for idly plotting too, *Graduation Day* is going to get on your nerves. We never find out, for instance, why Anne's stepfather is so utterly hostile to her, or for that matter, what's so special about Anne that the film should end on a farewell to her as she heads off back to Guam. But that's typical of *Graduation Day*: its final thesis is hopelessly muddled and full of loose ends. Screw the thesis, though, does it 'rock'? Well, the murders are okay, the highlight being a spiked cushion that the killer prepares for a pole-vaulter, and a brief but vivid fencing stab through the throat and out the other side, but Freed seems more concerned with hyping new-wave looking but AOR-sounding student band Felony, whose song 'Gorilla Rock' gets a full workout in the film as the audience roller skate around and around the stage. (Note: Felony actually went on to release two albums in the 80s, *The Fanatic* and *Exquisite*; a track from the latter featured on *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives*, F-mixed by Joe and Jeff Spry, the band continued into the 1990s when things hit the skids and Jeff committed suicide.) A time-capsule of the early eighties, *Graduation Day* is the sort of film I really ought to blush for recommending, but which has snuck into my slasher comfort zone and taken up residence, despite the groans of my better judgement.

Made in California.

Hunts



Bill Rebane's spider movie c
with Patrick J. Murphy's *Riding Tall* 37

Adapt for Herschell

The Gore Gore Girls

GRAVE OF THE VAMPIRE

John Hayes (1972)

See feature on John Hayes

Made In California.

HAUNTED

Michael De Gaeano (1976).

aka *The Haunted*

In Arizona during the Civil War, Abanaki (Ann Michelle), a Native American woman accused of witchcraft, is tied to a horse and left to die in the desert. One hundred years later Jennifer Barnes (Ann Michelle again) arrives in a desert settlement, once a Wild West movie-set, now occupied by a handful of lonely oddballs. Soon after, people start dying in mysterious circumstances. Is Jennifer really the reincarnation of Abanaki?

Haunted is a jumble of themes and non-sequiturs largely unhelped by narrative design. So what is it? A horror western? The combination of a supernatural revenge theme and the abandoned western film set locations almost fits, but such an Indian curse movie? Well, it's an element, certainly, but it's barely elaborated upon after the prologue. It's like a Hollywood melodrama, in the style of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* A prominent strand of the story deals with bitter old Aldo Ray, hanging out with a senile screen actress (Virginia Mayo, Cody Jarrett's lover in *White Heat*), hoping she'll eventually fall in love with him. Or maybe it's an art film about the impossibility of communication? A subplot involving a public payphone being erected in the dust-blown wilds of nowhere is as oblique and puzzlingly abstract as Antonioni. De Gaeano allows the whole thing to hover between all of these ideas without committing to any of them. Who knows what he was thinking.

Aldo Ray is on top form: the victim brother, who never recovered from the fact that his sibling stole the woman of his

dreams. Since his brother's accidental death, he's hung around, hoping for a place in his beloved's heart, but willing to settle for a place in her bed in the meantime, even if it's clear that she's seeing his brother in her crazy mind's eye. The depiction of old Hollywood in a modern context, and the relationship between fans and old movie stars, brings to mind the films of Curtis Harrington, although *Haunted* lacks the coherence Harrington would have brought to the story.

Cutting across this mournful tale, and ignoring for the moment the supernatural theme, there's another subplot involving two young men, at least one of whom is decidedly ambiguous in his sexuality. He embarks on a gentle relationship with visiting actress Jennifer Barnes. During a romantic night in the desert apropos of nothing, she enquires "Are you gay?" "No, I don't think so," he replies. Not the sort of response that closes the matter for good! Again, though, it's a story idea that appears to be heading somewhere interesting, only to evaporate without reaching a destination.

All of these story strands wave loosely around in the breeze for eighty minutes, sharing nothing more substantial than the designated location. And that's a good thing. *Haunted* is a perfect example of the way story values can be mutated by allowing location to determine action. There's no doubt that the opportunity to shoot the film on a derelict Wild West film-set guided the narrative in directions it otherwise would not have gone. By reacting to the mood and detail of a place, scriptwriters can escape the nagging clichés of the B-movie. It's an approach that unites unsung heroes like Frederick Friedel, and one-bit-wonders like Robert Townsman and Michael De Gaeano. With the art-house *Haunted* may not cohere, but it's got a unique vibe that feels like blessed relief after the mundane likes of, say, *Ghost Manor* or *House of Terror*. Perhaps only an interview with the elusive Mr De Gaeano would throw light on the puzzling nature of the film, but until such time, I'm happy to let sand blow over the questions and just enjoy the uncertainty.

Made In Arizona



HAUNTS

Berb Freed (1975)

aka *The Tor*

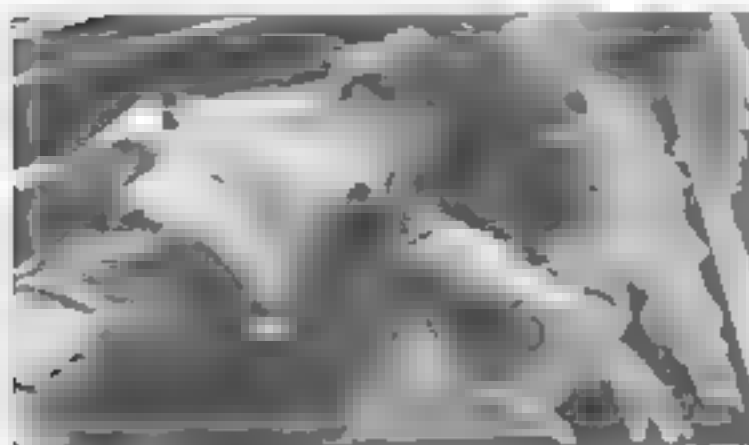
When a local girl is found raped and murdered, Ingrid Svenson (May Britt), a reserved young woman living on a farm in an isolated rural community, begins to fear for her own safety. One night as she's walking home from choir practice, she's attacked by a masked figure, but struggles free and alerts her Uncle Carl (Cameron Mitchell) and the local sheriff (Aldo Ray). Ingrid suspects Frankie, the butcher's boy (William Gray Espy) and views a new arrival with suspicion too; but when a second corpse is found this time in Ingrid's chicken-run, her shock coupled with memories of an unhappy childhood, make it increasingly difficult for her to distinguish real dangers from the phantasms of her own mind.

Haunts has some of the sombre rural destination of S.F. Brownrigg's *Keep My Grave Open* or Bill Rebane's *The Demon of Ludlow*, although thanks to Freed's steady hand as director it's closer to the former than the latter. The aptly named May Britt makes a brittle, earnest creature of Ingrid, capturing the prim nervousness of a woman who uses religion to keep desire at bay. Reliable turns from Cameron Mitchell and Aldo Ray bolster her in the later stages of the story, involving plot twists best left unexplained. They're not exactly surprises of the first order, but enough said: the film needs them to maintain interest. There's definitely a touch of the Italian *giallo* here, something that Pino Donaggio's stylish score helps to underline. The use of initially opaque flashbacks to childhood trauma blurs attempts to throw the audience off the scent, doubt about the female lead's sanity, arresting but non-sequitur images (such as Ingrid milking blood from a goat's udder), all of these devices echo the Italian murder-mysteries of, say, *Sem*.



Martino or Umberto Lenzi. Then we have a masked killer, several false endings, and the use of scissors to menace the heroine. If the film lacks the erotic fascination with cruelty essential to the true giallo, *Haunts* still has that touch of sadness coalescing around the fate of an unstable heroine that is common in films like *The Sweet Body of Deborah* or *Paranoid*. A touch of sleaze would have helped enrich the deal, but *Haunts* is nonetheless worth a look for the morbid setting and Britt's lean performance.

Made in California.
See also: *Graduation Day*



THE HEADLESS EYES

Kent Bateman (1971)

A burglar Bo Brundin trying to rob an apartment is caught in the act when the tenant awakens. A struggle ensues and the enraged victim turns aggressor, wielding a spoon—yes, a spoon—and gouging the burglar's eye from his socket, like a mollusc from its shell. The unfortunate thief, his eye dropping down his face, crawls from an upstairs window and flees down the fire escape. So begins *The Headless Eyes*, the first and so far premier example of the oft-neglected 'stalk-and-scoop' subgenre. The credit sequence described is so perfect you almost hope the film ends right there. You fear a thoroughly ordinary movie might follow on and spoil it. The cries of the injured thief are priceless in themselves—just a loop of Bo Brundin shrieking 'My eye! My EYE' (*unbelievable shrieks*) 'My eye!' as the actor crawls down the side of a New York slum and skulks off into the night. It's one of the great cheap horror flick beginnings, and yes, it leads into a film just as etayed. The thief—named Mal, although a s easy to miss—has moved on from that humiliating encounter and now works out his resentment using a sort of mixed-media, sculpture/murder approach, plundering the ocular organs of various, need it be said, inwring donors to make avant-garde 'nets.' His specialty? Eyes suspended in cubes of Perspex. Ear your heart out, Damien! (1971)

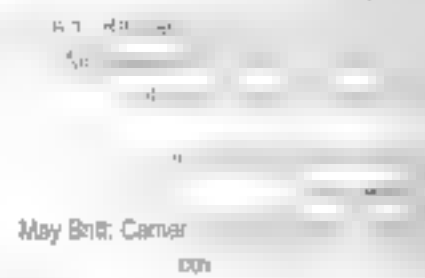
Once you've got over the initial hilarity, *The Headless Eyes* becomes a bleak and sorry tale with perhaps a smattering of arty ambition—the name of Bateman's production company, Lay in Vogue Films, is drawn from Virgil's *The Aeneid*, after all. Although it seems positively zany today, *The Headless Eyes* must have sent a few unwary souls out into the New York dark with an indestructible case of the jitters. It's not a straightforward slasher film; the killer is onscreen from the start, and it's not exactly a gore film either.

The graphic violence is limited to some red smears and a few fake eyes. As for a thrill-ride, forget it: though not quite plodding, it's certainly getting there, as if narrative too has been scooped out along with the protagonist's orb. No, the essence of the film is a sort of shabby, destitute, gutter-level weirdness—it's the cinematic equivalent of a scary old hag lady.

The emphasis on a grimy street-level reality merges the film with its first intended audience—as Mal stalks his prey past cinemas all too likely to show a movie like *The Headless Eyes*. Like William Lustig's *Marlowe* and Tim McCoy's supremely nasty *Sex Pisk*, inspiration has clearly been drawn from the very stalls and venues the film will play in—a feedback loop of sleaze. As a mocking the Solho-Botto fantasy of street-level artiness, director Kent Bateman depicts his dropout avant-gardist as merely another damaged sleaze suggesting through the 42nd Street slush-pile, in different from the tramps and druggies jumping into the cinema to sleep off their nightmares.

With its focus on a struggling artist in a poverty-stricken urban setting, *The Headless Eyes* resembles Abel Ferrara's *The Driller Killer*, and while the Ferrara film is the more fervently into violent, they'd make a great double bill. Amidst the bizarre stuff, here are a few quiet scenes that echo the emotional dimension of *The Driller Killer*: a hooker tries to offer Mal sympathy but ends up paying for it with her life; Mal's ex-lover drops in, trying to reach out to him, but is rebuffed by his bitterness; another scene lingers on the funeral preparations of a victim whose death we then see in flashback. Sadly, though, Bo Brundin can't match *The Driller Killer*'s ultra-naturalistic lean performance. The Swedish-born actor at times reaches silent movie levels of over-emphasis, although if you're in a forgiving mood

—this can give the film a whiff of delinquent reality: imagine a real killer agreeing to play himself in a movie, self-servingly crying to convey his inner pain and then overdoing it. Brundin deserves credit for the freak-out moments—heard once instead of ten times in a type-town, his shriek of 'My eye! My EYE! My eye!' is as chilling as Tom Towles's agonised, disbelieving screeches for the eye-popping scene in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, or David Ebbow's in *Kill Bill* (volume 2).



My eye—the start of *The Headless Eyes*





He's too hot for his window... says a drunken rich-girl to her sugar-daddy, as they slug booze from a bottle and spot Mal lurking in a shop window display. It's easy to miss the fact that Mal is in the store, which makes the scene even stranger. Finally, the placement of the camera discloses exactly where Mal is: he seems to be looking at the couple through a double-sided glass window display, while outside on the pavement. This illusion is broken when Mal deposits one of his artworks onto a plinth in the display. We then see that he's actually inside, looking out. Because the director has neglected to introduce Mal as the store-owner, there's a weird shift between inner and outer, suggesting an unstable boundary between the two and thus, 'if you like,' symbolically echoing the piercing of Mal's eye. Mal then follows the couple back to their apartment and gains entrance, killing them both with a hammer before settling back in a chair to enjoy this latest *subversive movie*. (Nothing else, the petty thief is now an inextricable aesthete.)

Tight to a fault, though, Mal has problems winning praise. *I like your work, whoever you are...* says a pretty girl who enters his shop. Her words seed him off hallucinating, running in terror through streets of stark, monolithic architecture. A brutalist piece of corporate art bolted above a doorframe looms over him, mocking the simple genuine compliment he's been paid. Mal is obviously moved by his admirer's words, because the next thing we know he's grave-robbing eyeballs from caavers, presumably so that he doesn't have to murder anyone else. He's interrupted by a sleazy cop who's pleased as punch thinking of the occasion he'll receive for capturing the killer, so we therefore feel a twinge of sympathy for Mal as he snivels, *I'm not finished!* and wabs him to death. Abandoning the grave-robbing idea, he chooses another victim through an intensely seamy market warehouse region at some godly hour in the early morning, the streets stained with eruptions and discolorations, vomit can almost smel the stench of putrefying vegetables. The actress makes a dash through a meat refrigeration storehouse and lucky for her, Mal gets accidental's stuck in a freezer. Some hectic superimposition and out-of-focus camerawork suggest a punicky last-day's shooting by a director forced to acknowledge that the money has finally run out, and that's your lot.

It's not willing to bet that *The Headless Eyes* was shot without a finished script, as it ends raggedly without a real conclusion. Nevertheless, it's still a fascinating trip through the slums of exploitation, far away from the gentrified avenues of mainstream horror, and it's an absolute must if you're interested in the grimmer reaches of American horror.

The Headless Eyes is sometimes said to be the work of John Pechard, aka Ron Sullivan the porno director. This is an interesting hypothesis, but remains unconfirmed. Ronald Sullivan is credited as producer of *The Headless Eyes*. Ken Bateman certainly exists: he moved to California in 1977, where he picked up his only other confirmed movie directing credit, *Land of No Return*, an entirely ordinary adventure story with Meg Tandy and William Shatner that looks like it comes from Hollywood, not the seamy underworld of *The Headless Eyes*. He consolidated this journey into the mainstream by creating and directing *Family Ties*, and TV show that launched Michael J. Fox's career, as well as episodes of Valerie's *Family* for Lorimar and *The Hogan Family* for Warner. An early credit has him as production manager on *It's A Mad Mad Mad Mad* (1970), directed and written by porno filmmaker and writer Ron Wertheim. A project called *The Rogue and the Girl* (1982?) was directed by Kent Bateman and Dick Robinson, released on tape by Rainer Röh's Home Video Theater. The cast includes Dick Robinson, Carol Flors, Dan Shanon, and the screenplay is credited to Kent Bateman and James Bryan, although Bryan has no recollection of Bateman's involvement. The presence of Robinson and the mention of James Bryan, however, suggest this was a Utah-based production.

Leading man Bill Brundin was born 25 April 1937 in Uppsala, Sweden. He later appeared alongside Sean Connery and Henry Fonda in *McTeer* for AIP. Brundin's screams in *The Headless Eyes* prologue can also be heard on the trailer for Doris Wishman's *Another Day, Another Man*. Bateman's daughter is actress Josselyn, who got her start in her father's sitcom *Family Ties*.

Made in New York City

THE HEARSE

George Bowers, 1960

Worried Jane Hardy (Trish Van Devere) moves into her deceased aunt's country house after inheriting it in her mother's will. The locals are rude and unhelpful, mainly because the aunt and her lover were said to have worshipped the Devil. Naturally, local children believe the house to be haunted. Estate manager Walter Pritchard (Joseph C. Phillips) resents Jane moving in because he feels the house should have been left to him, and the only local handy-man willing to work on the place is Paul (Perry Lang), a love-struck teenager who forms a violently amiable cross-attachment to her. Worst of all, a giant hearse repeatedly tries to ram Jane's car off the road, and drives menacingly up her front driveway in the middle of the night. Fortunately, a nice young man called Tom (David Gautreaux) comes along and sweeps under her feet, although it's strange that he only ever seems to want to meet her at night.



It's hard to explain why so generic a ghost story should please, but I enjoyed *The Hearses* immensely. All of the elements are in place for a by-the-numbers spook show. We have a diva (decade recently recovered from a nervous breakdown), a town full of hostile bumpkins eager to give a city gal a hard time, a suave stranger with something of the night about him, and a spooky old hearse aggressively walking the heroine down moonlit country roads. Did I mention the diary Jane finds in the attic, explaining her mom's doomed romance and the devilish death pact into which she had entered? *The Hearses* is stacked to the rear axles with these eerie leftovers, right down to windows that fly open of their own volition and a graveside revelation before the finale. So why do I find this Crown International pol-buster so appealing?

Firstly, Trash Van Devere is touching and sympathetic as the die-but-determined heroine, unwilling to let Joseph Cotten's opportunistic estate agent, Med Flory's lascivious sheriff, or sundry other shopkeepers get her down. Perhaps the script gives her a bit more sex appeal than the average horny teenager would acknowledge (even boys not as if Britney Spears has come to town), but she's brave and witty and deserving of her chance of happiness, and I found myself wishing her well as she embarked upon her blousy Gothic romance with spooky but dinky Tom. I love the main piano theme too, which crops up from time to time throughout, by employing an angular descending motif against a sensuous counter-melody. It dreamily underlines both the romance and the menace of the story. The rest of the soundtrack leans too heavily on a repetitive *Twilight Zone* refrain, but it's serviceable nonetheless.

Perhaps the film's biggest handicap is the lack of a satisfying ending. Jane finds the dead bodies of two supporting characters for no other reason, you suspect, than because the writers needed to raise Jane's doubts and finish the narrative. The film, like so many ghost stories, never tries to explain how spirits and shades can affect the physical world, ramming cars off the road with denied

enders and all. And what to Tom's counting of Jane could be all in her mind – the murder of two key characters denied.

However, the traditional virtues of the ghost story are in least three-quarters present: the hulking 1950s hearse has a satisfying leer to its chrome bumpers, and its scary old driver would not be out of place in one of the BBC's M.R. James adaptations. Like the films of S.F. Browning, the emotional centre of the film is based on the efforts of a single woman to survive various attacks and indignities, while a villainous selection of men try to devastate her. If Browning's films ultimately have more integrity, thanks to their powerful rep performances, less formulaic plots, and a stronger sense of place, there's still a lot to be said for *The Hearses*. Van Devere made two such films in 1990, having also appeared in Peter Medak's intermittently chilling ghost story *The Changeling*. Director George Powers was best known for directing hit TV series *The Broken of Hearts*. After *The Hearses* he made three more films, including *My Tutor* (1983), before settling down as an editor whose career highlights include the brutal & tense slasher tale *The Stepfather* (1987) and the Johnny Depp meets Jack the Ripper horror-comic *From Hell* (2001).

Made in California.

HITCH HIKER TO HELL

by Benwick (1977)

See interview with Elaine Bernick

Made in California

HOME BODIES

Larry Yust (1977)

Six elderly tenants – Mr. Crawford (Douglas Fowley), Mr. and Mrs. Loomis (Ian Wolfe and Ruth McDavitt), Mr. Samuel Williams Hansen, Miss Evans (Frances Fuller), and Mattie (Paula Trueman) – are threatened with eviction from their old apartment block in Cincinnati. Incensed, they embark on a sabotage campaign against the nearby building redevelopment which threatens to reduce their district to rubble. Ringleader Mattie persuades the group to – a) burn down the building, b) the death of a relocation worker and murdering a fat-cat property tycoon. As doubts assail the rest of the group, Mattie becomes more ruthless, until her fellow tenants must act to save themselves.

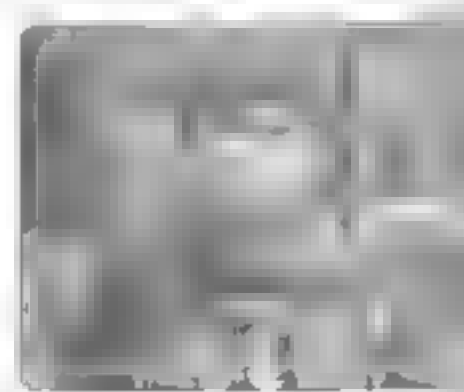
I'm not sure if I should be reviewing this. *Homebodies* was picked up for distribution by Avco, and director Larry Yust had previously shot a film for Universal called *Truck Boys*. But it's independently financed, it's a film I adore, and it's rarely mentioned in studies of the genre – perhaps because it lacks the more familiar genre trappings. It is, after all, concerned exclusively with the fortunes of old people: there's not a teenage hunk or teenage slut to be seen. If you can get your head around this, however, *Homebodies* is a film of genuine depth and class. There's a bracingly sour edge to the story, and the finale is as complex and morally ambiguous as you could wish. In fact, you were to recast the film with young radicals and set it during the student riots of 1968, the essential dynamics would cross over.

The older you are, though, the more the film raises a smirk as the beloved qualities of older life – peace and quiet, stability of home – are defended with the same zeal as the young bring to their passion for noise and freedom of movement. The first great moment occurs when Mattie witnesses a young man fall to his death from the skyscraper under construction at the end of her street. As his body splats to the ground, the roar and bustle of the building site ceases for the first time in the film, and you see Mattie realise just how useful death can be.

There are flaws here and there, chiefly the depiction of the relocation official, a hard-hearted bitch called Miss Penack (Linda Marsh), who is scripted with less finesse than the protagonists. Rather like Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's*



Scenes from *The Hearses* are the film's peerless gothic UK poster art



THE HOUSE OF SEVEN CORPSES

Paul Harrison 1973

aka *Seven Times Dead* (UK video cover title)

John Ireland plays mean-spirited director Eric Harrison, and with Dominique his fading actress-lover Gayle. In this tale of a film crew struggling to shoot a Gothic horror picture in a house where actual murders took place. Culminating around the grand old mansion location like a bad smell is John Carradine, who ought to be enough to give anyone the willies, but despite such bad omens Harrison persists in being a bastard, even after his leading lady's murder is found bisected in the night. Meanwhile, a minor cost member adds genuine occult incantations into the script, in the name of authenticity.

What really happens *The House of Seven Corpses* is the music. Everything else – the clichéd romance between director and ageing senile star, the pretentious Hollywoodisms of the supporting cast – could have worked, or at least have been explained away as satire. Sadly, the workaday horror score flattens tension and blurs the potential for irony. This is supposed to be about a 1970s film crew shooting an old-fashioned Gothic, but Harrison fails to respond to the challenge, leaving the same clichéd over everything. It's exasperating: how hard can it be to

draw a distinction between a modern-day film shoot and the authentic period-piece they're making? The whole point is that characters who think they're just acting have to deal with a genuine supernatural menace. If the director can't sell the change of emphasis, you might as well pack up and go home. When members are murdered while packing away klieg lights and electrical cables, there's no attempt to give their reality a different modern-day complexion. And since the story of the tale is surely that mediocre actors are being asked to fake terror, it seems a shame to have them act just as badly when they're meant to be real people. I find myself getting hot under the collar about this because there's a good idea here, which could have yielded a *Marat/Sade* redux, with a Mario Bava or Terence Fisher surrogate besieged by the very ghosts they've unleashed in the cinema.

Harrison is a TV director who straddles his theatrical releases (stares a ghoulish horse in the mouth). One can only wonder what the unfortunate scriptwriter thought when he saw the finished film.



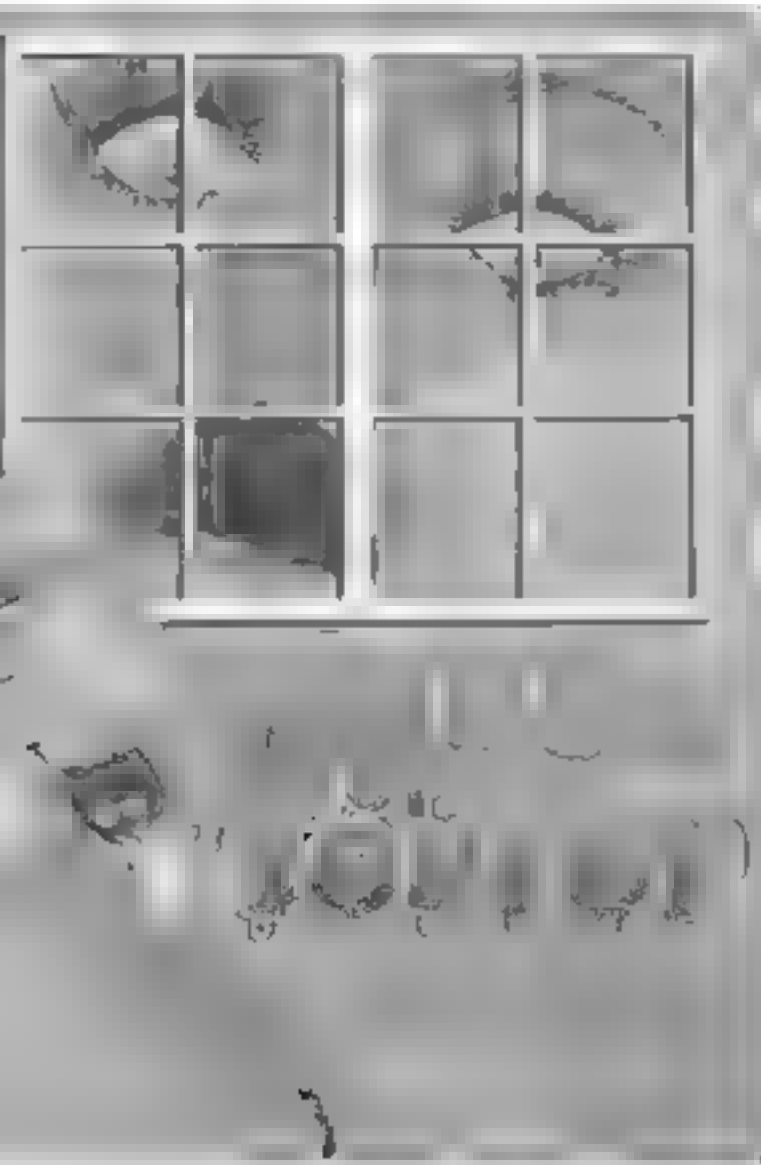
Dino Jones photographed *The House of Seven Corpses* just after directing his excellent *Abducted* (see chapter on James Ray's career (*Sybil's Assassins*, *The City of Dread*), who also pre-directed appears onscreen in a blink-and-you-miss-it cameo as a swashy, titled period character. In the film a far-too-promising prodigious actor-director-stuntman Gary Kent was associate producer (see interview with Kent).

Made in Czech



The House of Seven Corpses was the last Seven Times Dead in the cover of 1973.

This artwork for the crude UK video cover for video found a new life. The House of Terror is much more...



HOUSE OF TERROR

Serge Cosmich 1973

aka *The Fear at the Funeral*

aka *Scream Bloody Murder*

A nurse (Jeanne Bismuth) hired to look after the unstable wife of a wealthy businessman (Mitchell Gregg) plots with her boyfriend (Arnold Blanton) to inherit the man's money. When the businessman's wife apparently commits suicide, the dead woman's identical sister (Jacquelyn Hyde) turns up and latches onto the plot – but who is fooling whom, and who will be the next to die?

A bland title like *House of Terror* virtually begs you to forget it, yet the prologue promises much: an impressionistic charade filmed in a style that recalls the films of Mario Bava (*Hatchet for the Honeycomb* in particular). As soon as the credits are over though, this misleading signpost leads nowhere but a quagmire of fatuous Dutch angles and TV-movie styling. Actually, I love Dutch angles, fatuous or otherwise. What I hate is mundanity: that dreary brand of drama we get when the director is either unimaginative or simply forced to tent by a script without a single vivid scene. *House of Terror*'s endless dialogue is shot with a workaday flatfootedness that completely ignores the pre-credits flourish. A nurse and a criminal discuss their tangled lives but it's utterly uninviting, as they emote in TV-movie hel to the tune of the usually reliable Jaime Mendoza-Nava, taking it on their behalf on the soundtrack. *House of Terror* is the sort of movie that can drive you off the scent when it comes to researching a book like this. It's deeply, utterly tedious, like a C-list tele-soap, the derivative of a derivative of *Knot's Landing*. But don't just take my word for it.



with search the internet for a synopsis, you find that no one seems to agree about exactly who is employing whom to look after who, and this is established in the first fifteen minutes! It's no wonder I had to widge through this twice to make the deal is stick. To be fair, cinematographer Bob Maxwell tries a few arresting compositions, and he went on to shoot *The Centurion*, *Crush* for John Peyser, an altogether better movie with a more genuine style. On the other hand, he also shot *House of Pain* and *The Psycho Slayer*, two excruciatingly dull Robert Vincent O'Neil productions both of which lack the same essential spark as this one. I we're celebrating the weird, unpredictable fringes of American horror cinema, then *House of Terror* represents the flat, featureless centre. Technically competent but droningly uninspired films like this really are the worst of genre graveyards. I would cling in eager gratitude to the worst film by Jess Franco in pre-erectile erection. (It's made with the eye on a TV sales niche, *House of Terror* makes vain, vain attempts at sincerity, or failing all that, sleaziness. Was Sergei Gancevich ever thought to make a horror film? I have no idea, he'd have been better off marketing tranquilisers.)

Made in: unknown

THE HOUSE WHERE DEATH LIVES

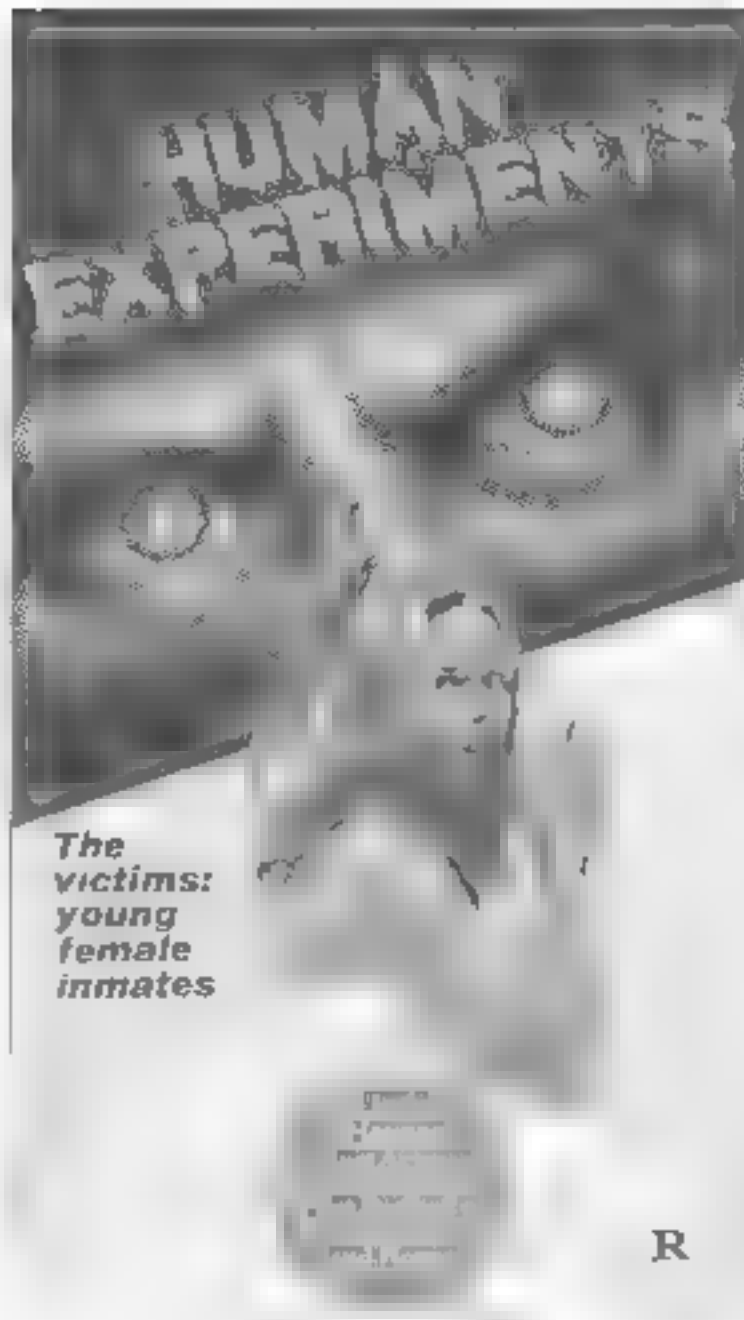
by an Beatle (1980)

aka *Detention*

A young woman, Meredith Stone (Patricia Pearcy), lands a job as nurse to a wealthy, ailing old man, Mr Langrock (Joseph Cotten). Once established in the house, she discovers that Langrock's retarded son is sequestered in an upstairs room. The old man's ever-present alcoholic attorney, Leon Charles and a bumbling no-nonsense maid (Alice Nunn) round out the household. Meredith falls in love with Langrock's sixteen-year-old grandson (about John Duka's son) but as secrets from both Meredith's and Langrock's lives are revealed, murders begin to occur in the house. More than one of the household have skeletons in the cupboard, but who is responsible for the killings?

La-di-da, another day, another house of horror. *The House*

Where Death Lives is well-shot, competently acted, professionally mounted, so why does it feel like an estate agent trying to sell a dodgy property. In truth, after twenty minutes of this routine I was waiting for an Andy Milligan film, or another look at *Honoring House* (like a pair of sensible shoes worn to a drag ball) but under-performs terribly, wandering into the horror genre without the wit or warring-drive to play the game. I'm glad I never walked out for this in a theatre, it's another square pretender that belongs in the purgatory of afternoon cable-TV sandwiches.



The victims: young female inmates

R

between house makeovers and celebrity gothic features. The cast features a young John Duka's, step-son of failed Presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, a presumably hard-up Joseph Cotten, more notably, Alice Nunn, yes indeed, none other than 'Large Marge' from *Peewee's Big Adventure*. She's the highlight for the horror content, well there are a couple of blows to the head administered by the killer, some gloominess around in the hallways, and that's about your lot.

Gentile's first film was a seventeen-minute short based on a A. J. R. Pierce story called *The Bunker, Chisley* (1974) followed by a ten-minute short called *Doubletalk* (1975) for which he received an Academy Award Nomination in 1976 for Best Action Short Film. He has several credits as an executive producer on TV through the nineties and beyond.

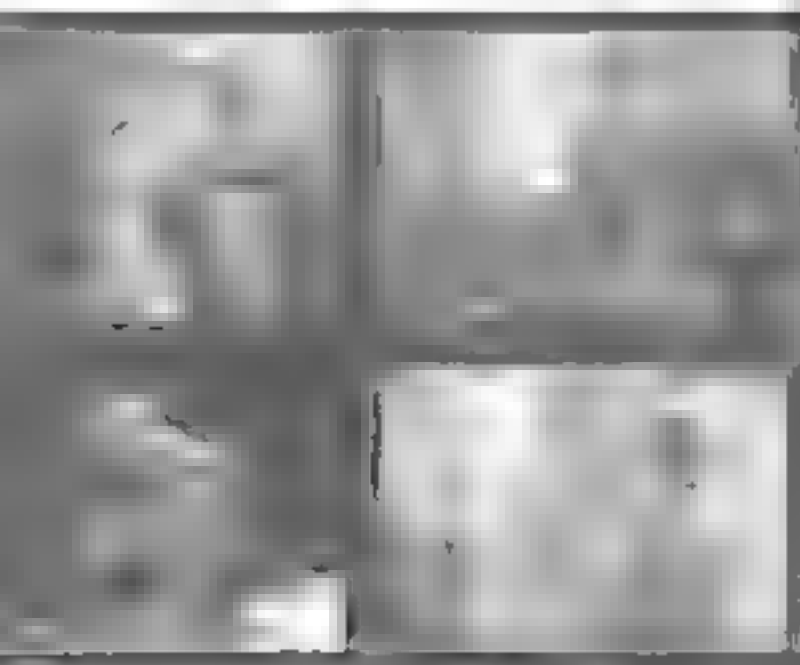
Made in: unknown

IN MAN EXPERIMENTS

Gregory Goodell (1979)

aka *Beyond the Law*

Although the title tends one to expect a sleazebag with copious torture and nastiness in the style of *Bladechucking Frank* and *The Toothless Thunders*, this is actually a well-acted fairly maddening thriller. What do you mean, 'How disappointing.'? Racie Foster (Linda Haynes) is a toughened pro of the Country-as-Western circuit, res near but wary, as befits a woman making her way in a world populated by the likes of exploitation monster-line aide Ray, here playing a sleazy nightclub owner who puts make-up on her during the film's opening scenes. The tense first half acts a horribly plausible run of bad fortune on the embattled lead, as she stumbles off the high road into the aftermath of a petty slapping, only to be blamed for the killings herself. Tense and mood are admirably maintained. Goodell knows how to hit it



attention by feeding us information bit by bit, letting the accumulation draw us in. When Haynes is sent down to the dungeons, the usual clichés of prison life beckon, but the film plucks us fully inside the formula, with the heroine's gradual collapse under pressure given time to escalate believably. Some films never stumble to the melodramatic end of the scale not soon enough. It takes his time, letting the drip-drip pressure of prison life and the odious attentions of resident psychiatrist creep Dr. K die (Gregory Lewy's directorial work). By the time Rachel is steered by the mad doctor into crawling through a ventilation shaft seething with creepy-crawly, we accept that she's primed to flip her lid. Gregory Goodell is the author of *Independent Feature Film Journal: A Complete Guide from Concept Through Distribution*, a book first published in 1982. *Human Experiments* was his debut film, after which he moved into television scriptwriting and production, eventually reappearing as a (TV) director in the mid-nineties. The executive producer of *Human Experiments* was Edwin Scott Brown, director of *The Firm*.
Made in unknown

DISMEMBER MAMA

(Paul Leder, 1977)

aka *Poor Albert & Little Annie*

aka *Seven*

What good is breeding if all it results in is a multiplication of worms? So asks wealthy young frump Albert Robertson Zooley Hunt, before escaping from a low-security mental home of which he's been admitted by his mother (Joanne Moore Jordan). Heading for the family home with vengeance in mind, he arrives to find the house empty except for the maid, Alice (Marlene Tracy). Demanding to know if she's a virgin, he then rapes and murders her because she says she has a daughter. The daughter, eleven-year-old Annie (Lori Reisch), duly arrives as the door Albert tells Annie that Momma Hunt is dead and he is to take care of her. The two then embark upon a day of fun and games at the amusement park, with Albert exploiting the wonder of Annie's purity and innocence before the two of them retire to a hotel for the evening. But while Annie sleeps in the bedroom, Albert brings a prostitute (Rosetta Olmstead) back to the room and strangles her. Annie wakes up and discovers the truth about her new friend.

Dismember Mama was originally called *Poor Albert & Little Annie*, which gives a better précis of the film than the more ominous and provocative moniker. Maternal dismemberment is conspicuously off the menu, what we have instead is a character study about Albert, a spoiled rich boy psychopath, and his chaste dream date with Annie, the pre-pubescent daughter of his mother's maid. It's a frequently irritating film though, with music that strips the film of mood, or blurring overstates the case

(Hershel Burke Gilbert worked primarily on TV shows such as *Coltgun's Island* and boy does it show). Zooley Hunt is convincing as the killer, and his stammering and pursuit of Annie is genuinely unpleasant and unnerving. But this is another of those psycho horror directors about a guy obsessed with sexual purity and despoiling of sexuality. It's a character that finds rather wearing. I usually try to find a point of empathy with the killer in a movie, as long as there's at least some sort of psychological dimension to work, but I confess this particular brand of autistic obsession leaves me cold and distinctly unsympathetic. Marc B. Ray's *Seven Bloody Murders* dresses up the same central character study with enough bizarre excess to get me by, but here the killer's purity fixation is too hard and unadorned for me to have fun with the picture. Instead I spent the whole film loathing the central character and wishing Little Annie would cut his throat.

Of course the subtext, not so care as is hidden, is paedophilia. A hen never lays a finger on the child, but his obsession with purity and childhood innocence is paedophilic dressed up in sexual. His dream date begins with the tentative standbys of amusement parks and boating lakes, but each day out with an older man doesn't normally end with a night at a hotel. When the unsuspecting Annie awakes, Albert grows more and more agitated, staring at her unconscious form and pacing round the hotel suite, trying to deny the contradiction that lies at the heart of his worship of purity: the desire to defile it. Leder's films are unapologetically slow, but here, because the central relationship could never be consummated onscreen, the film drags its heels and struggles to maintain tension, ending in a rushed and unsatisfying about face. Albert realises that Annie has seen him strangling the prostitute and in a couple of terse lines decides that she's now just the same as other women. Presumably he reaches this



From the
 Home

opposite page 100
 The US video cover for *Human Experiments* trumpets its Sigel Film Festival accolades

opposite page 100
 Adverts for *The House Where Death Lives* continue to suggest a December and November star Patricia Pearcy reacts to news that there are still three weeks of shooting to go

opposite page 100
 Under the top 20



Albert hated women...
It started with his mother
Albert got a knife..
Poor women..
Poor Albert!

ROMAL PRODUCTIONS
presents

**Poor Albert
& Little Annie**

[illegible]

• for Poor Albert & Little
Dismember Mama; says the

$n = 100$ and $n = 200$

The jar



he must of his role and given the deeply unpleasant After and reinforcing

also *My Friends Need Killing* and *Sketches of a Stranger*

2016年7月20日 星期三

Get the facts with David Duchovny and Ellen Barkin

Made in New York State

Jack Abramowitz (1979)

[illegible]

movie made by Sadie from *The Last House on the Left*. So, a classic of seventies slaze, then? Well almost, except that director Jack Bruvion pads the film mercilessly with multiple recaps of what's gone before, extending the aftermath of each murder with unapologetic repetitive flashbacks. *Jane* is already short, around sixty five minutes, but if you remove the flashback montages I doubt it would scrape to forty. That's room for another two motiveless murders! It's the soundtrack though that really messes things up – basically a sixty minute jam by a noodlesome acid-rock group called 'The Fear', it plays continuously throughout the film, seemingly unedited, veering from pedestrian riffing to increasingly gruesome freak-outs. The Fear *drizzle* their racket on over the film from start to finish. It's possibly the most abuse and unsophisticated use of film music I've ever heard. Ten minutes would have been a trim, sixty is just a hummer litigating the Jimi Hendrix Experience reconfigured as a flannelboy instrumental outfit by three tasteless hippies, given vast amounts of dope and then told they're antistax. Relatively minor problems, like lead actress Mary Jane Carpenter looking closer to thirty than the required sixteen, pale into insignificance. *Jane*'s omnipresent voice-over expressing her schizoid dissociation and contempt for others goes on a bit too, although we're used to such money-saving contrivances in ultra low-budget filmmaking (see Wishman, Doris). But it's come to something when you can watch a film like this and say you wish it had been directed by Roberto Finau.

Made in New York State.

by JAX
Bruce Tusciano (1985)

aka *Cherry* (US copyright database title)
Paul (Curry Wallace), a lonely businessman-bachelor out driving late at night, is involved in a collision with another vehicle. When he pulls over and rescues the driver, an old man – Les Miller, all the stranger cares about is retrieving a large jar from the back seat. Paul drives home, taking the old man with him, but once there the old man disappears, leaving only the jar – which contains a pickled penis and foetus. Almost immediately, strange things start to happen. Paul experiences hallucinations and bad dreams, and comes to believe that his lonely existence has been invaded by a malevolent supernatural force.
The Jar is a real oddity, leaning so heavily on toning nihilism that the paper-thin plot plays second fiddle to whatever else was on the minds of writer George Bradley and director Bruce Tusciano. While it's usually inadvisable to attempt amateur psychoanalysis without reference to at least an interview with the filmmaker, *The Jar* seems positively to demand exegesis on the psychological level. So with the necessary interpretative caveats in place (i.e. I'm guessing), here's what I saw in *The Jar*.

Paul's slightly effete manner and the constant positioning of him as victim, frequently nude or semi-nude, suggests the possibility of a gay reading. (Plus there's something about the way Wallace wears a pair of jeans that just screams 'metropolitan homo'). The actor's hesitant, resolutely un-macho screen presence, and the character's status as a single man prone to visions of quasi-sexual victimisation, suggests a story about someone struggling with a closeted sexuality. However, given that the film's only other key character, Crystal (Karen Sjoberg), is set up as a possible love interest, it's hard to tell where Paul's sexual confusion ends and the writer's begins.

The recurrent symbolism of the jar and its silent, malevolent occupant points towards a species of guilt gnawing away at the character. Could Paul be guilty that he's not contributing to the continuance of the species? Or else. The Jar could represent the closet itself, with a deformed creature trapped within, silently reproaching the dreamer/protagonist. "I'm not going to let you keep haunting me. I'm not going to let you tear me apart. Get out! Get out!" Paul screams. The twisted denial implied here suggests that the very symbol of the character's self-repression is blamed for the repression itself, with truth/self-knowledge blamed for threatening the success of repression. "I've have taken everything away from

me and left me alone." Paul accuses it, which sounds – like the plaint of an unhappy gay man attacking his own orientation). Of course – if this reading is correct it's Paul's guilt, not his sexuality, that condemns him to loneliness, because he fears to share what he feels he should not be.

Paul's dreams and hallucinations are populated by a number of characters. But who are they? The first we see is a boy rising up from a bath full of blood. Then there's the street-kid (Dean Schlaepfer), sometimes broodingly aggressive, sometimes tear-stained, who turns up in a scene where Paul dreams the two of them are standing together on a ledge of a high rooftop. The suspicious-narcissistic quality of the film suggests that both of these figures are younger versions of Paul, although the latter, with his hustlerish appearance, could also be an illicit object of desire. Paul also dreams of a little girl who lets go of the wing of her balloon (like a spermatozoa?) and then reaches out to hold his hand. Perhaps she represents the daughter he'll never have? Who knows? *Maybe you want to know too much*, Paul chides, when Crystal persists in asking him questions. He drifts off when she engages Paul in a conversation about the merits of psychology, and the soundtrack fills up with a metallic ringing sound, blocking out what she's saying. Whatever else is going on, this is *definitely* a film about repression.

As for the old man, his status, real or imaginary, remains uncertain. It's tempting to read the car-crash between Paul and the old man in simple Freudian terms as a homosexual encounter, but since no one else ever sees the man, and Paul never shows anyone the jar and its occupant, he could be yet another symbolic reproach: this time an accusing father, perhaps. In the film's final scenes, Paul goes seeking comfort from Crystal, daydreaming about the two of them making passionate love together. However, when she answers the door and they embrace, she turns into the old man, an inevitable development that makes it all the more likely that the nature of Paul's problem is suppression of sexual orientation.

An up-marched lurch into action-adventure in the last fifteen minutes suggests two different production periods splused, unsuccessfully, together. Perhaps finishing money was only available on condition that the narrative be opened out, at whatever cost to plausibility. Bruce Tusciano's strange little film deserves credit for its unusual approach and concept, and if I were you I'd give it a look. If you see it around, I hesitate to make comparisons between *The Jar* and *Eraserhead*, as they would set up unrealistically high expectations, but I wouldn't be surprised if Lynch's was uppermost in Tusciano's mind – he certainly prioritises the unstable reality of his central character to a similarly solipsistic degree. It would be interesting to know what Tusciano did next: *The Jar* shot in Denver, appears to have been his only film, but there's enough going on here to suggest that a second Tusciano film would have been of real interest.

Made in Colorado



The marvelous release of *The Jekyll and Hyde Portfolio*, one of the world's rarest videos, and the closest thing to an Andy Manger 6.



THE JEKYLL AND HYDE PORTFOLIO

ed. Jeffrey Harris (1971)
aka *Jekyll and Hyde Portfolio*

It may already have fallen in the neglected horror category, thanks to a porno mind-control effort called *The Sex Machine* (1972).

However, it's a wonder he wasn't struck off the directors' register after *The Jekyll and Hyde Portfolio*, a clumsy but often hilarious confection perhaps best appreciated by Andy Morgan fans. Thanks to a superficial resemblance to Miligan's work. A period setting, creaky stock music cues, a deformed retarded servant and grainy blown-up 16mm photography may have you thinking this is an undiscovered epic by the Staten Island maestro, although the phrasing of Miligan's wall-to-wall dialogue or his thematic obsession with family corruption eventually compromise the illusion. The opening scene, in which a girl on a swing is impaled by a pitchfork, is a haphazardly edited mishmash straight out of *The Ghastly Ones*, but the giveaway is Harris's use of slow-motion, a celluloid-hungry technique the cash-strapped Milig would never have countenanced.

And so follows a lethargic combo of sex, violence and costume drama, as police investigate the turn-of-the-century Florence Nightingale Institute, where the staff and students - who seem to divide their free time between making-out and staging theatrical adaptations - are being knocked off faster than the lab specimens they ceaselessly carve. Harris delights in showing his actors poke around in the innards of freshly dissected frogs, his camera gawping enthusiastically - rather as René Clément revelled in gory heart operations in *Night of the Bloody Apes*. This is horror as might be conceived by a twelve-year-old boy, and while the moderately explicit sex scenes would prevent that age group from seeing the film, the overall tone is definitely immature.

Perhaps to counteract the childishness with a hint of sophistication, there's a self-conscious campiness to some of the dialogue and the lesbian drooling of the head nurse has a certain broad-brush comedy but, as failed camp is one of the cinema's least appealing dishes, this'd have been better off playing it straight. Elsewhere Harris tries to mimic the dated conventions of the period-horror setting, a brave move on what looks like a \$17,000

budget. Sadly the Giallo approach fails because of the less than stellar actors, who were presumably cast more for their willingness to bare their snatches than for their stylized line-readings. No wonder they're adrift though. Harris has a detective talk directly to camera (a flagrantly modern device), while random electronic squeals on the soundtrack demonstrate a cavalier disregard for period ambience that Jess Franco would admire. As for clarity, a voice-over at the beginning tells you all you need to know.

Strange tales of evil men and women, monsters some call them have invaded the minds and imaginations of the superstitious and the curious for centuries and centuries. Such a human monster was the one to whom many have labelled the most realistic and evil of them all. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a name that conjures up an immediate spectre of corruption, lust and evil. Infamous names that come immediately to mind are those of Jack the Ripper, the Borgias, Bluebeard, Rasputin, the mad monk, the Marquis de Sade, Eric Horden, and many others.

Made in: unknown

KISS OF THE TARANTULA

Chris Manger (1975)
aka *Spider*

Young Susan Bradley (Rebecca Eddins and Susan Eddins) who loves spiders, lives with her kindly motherless father John (Herman Wallner) and mean mother Martha (Beverly Adams) at a big old funeral home. Martha hates John, "Don't touch me, smell of chemicals, and death!" & she hates Susan, and she loathes Susan's little spider friends. The only thing Martha cares about is John's money, and she's prepared to seduce her husband's brother Walter (Eric Mason), to get it. Together, the two of them plot to murder John, but Susan overhears them and releases a tarantula into Martha's bed. Martha dies of a heart attack. Years later, at high school, Susan (Suzanne Ling) is still not happy. Shunned by her peers, and plagued by anonymous innuendoes from her Uncle Walter, she has retreated into a fantasy world where her pet spiders are her only true friends. One Halloween night, a gang of boys breaks in intending to steal a coffin. They force their way into Susan's basement and crush one of her tarantulas. Later that night she invites them to a drive-in date, intending to wate them by releasing spiders into their car. Instead of scaring everyone, though, she accidentally causes their deaths: in the panic, a window is broken and one victim bleeds to death. Another has his neck broken as his friend crushes his windpipe against the steering wheel. The only survivor is Joan (Rita French), and she's driven insane. Nancy (Patricia Landolt) suspects that Susan is responsible after overhearing her apologise to the copulose Joan, and tells her boyfriend Bo (Jay Scott Neill), the only one of the gang who wasn't at the drive-in that night. Bo seduces Susan then turns nasty, demanding to know the truth about the deaths. Betrayed and angry, Susan sets her spiders on Bo as he works down a heating duct. Can she keep getting away with murder?

Kiss of the Tarantula is great fun, but there are quite a few problems. Suzanne Ling, who resembles a cross between Marilyn Harris and Diane Keaton, is too beautiful to convince as a wat flower and high school reject, and if she loves spiders, why is she willing to put them in confined spaces (a car, a heating duct), with people who are obviously going to thrash around and squash them? (Not that the spiders get squashed for real, you'll be glad to know). Susan is worried about the fate of the girls in the car, but what did she expect - that they would die, having tarantulas crawling over them? Susan is presumably shunned at school because of her father's occupation, but this is never even mentioned by her peers. Walter clearly hates his brother John, but why? What is it that makes Susan feel so close to spiders? The only indication is a scene where her mother sees her playing with one and squashes it, saying it's disgusting. Surely there's more to her love than childish rebellion?

So, if the story is so poorly developed, and the motivations implausible, what is there to enjoy? For me at least, quite a lot. As

SO SILENT

SO DEADLY

SO FINAL

KISS OF THE TARANTULA

Kiss of the Tarantula has a morbid setting (much of the action takes place around a curiously (and funneled) home, set alone in the woods redolent of Lucio Fulci's *The House by the Cemetery*), the girl-and-her-spiders concept is so weirdly charming it can survive the glaring inconsistencies, and the death scenes (though slightly silly) are actually quite bizarre and memorable (this movie in the cinema back in 1962 and the DVD edit restores the clarity of the photography, has sealed the deal with a electronic score by Philip Bishop, who also provided a Walla! Huyek's *Messiah of Evil* and Thomas Alderson's *Never Arm*, is disarmingly cheesy and Mongolian, and even in one great sequence that deserves to be singled out, in which Susan pushes her amorous uncle down the stairs and paralyzes him before dragging him off to the funeral parlour and sealing him in a coffin. The process is shown in fascinating detail, as Susan utilizes a mechanical corpse-hoist to finish the job. So it's like me, you see *Phantasm* and *Phantasm 2* you'll probably get a kick from this monkeying about in the morgue.

Kiss of the Tarantula (or *Spider House* as it was called on its UK release) has been dismissed or ignored in most retrospectives of the genre, perhaps because its forlorn quality is not quite pulpish enough. In that it shares a gene with the films of the same era, it's a masterpiece (Daniel Cohn produced it, and long-time friend Fleming Sellenberg's *Man's First Girls*) shot it. There's a sort of happy-go-lucky grimace to the music (score) while the theme of a disturbed young woman seeking peace and happiness with her father should also ring a few bells for fans of Hayes's *Deviant*. Yet in Manger's first film was *California: The Year of the Communist* (aka *The Good Life*) (1969), followed by *Black Country* (1974), in between which he worked as camera operator and associate producer on James Bryan's *Escape to Paradise* (1976 - see chapter Bryan), but sadly it seems he never worked again after *Kiss of the Tarantula*. Features aside, however, Manger continued to work on film. The noted human rights campaigner Dr. Gregory Stanton (aka *Greg Stanton*) a professional filmmaker accompanied him on one of his trips in the summer of 1986 and his steady hand as a camera operator produced tapes that I hope will someday be made into a documentary film about the Cambodian genocide. The *Cambodian Genocide Project* won a grant from the United States Institute of Peace to produce a rough cut of a film, but we never secured adequate funding to complete the film. I have turned over all the videotape to the Cambodian Genocide Program at Tufts and also have originals, so I still hope a documentary filmmaker will be able to use the witness testimony we collected. See <http://www.genocidewatch.org/dhcn.htm>

Made in California.

THE LAST HOUSE ON DEAD END STREET

Victor Jandou Riger Works 1971 released 1977

aka *The Fun House*

aka *The Cuckoo Clock of Hell*

The Last House on Dead End Street is as far removed from the majesty of the films reviewed here as Saturn is from the Earth. It is a tedious, cynical, misanthropic exercise in brutality (but nevertheless has a rapier intelligence, making it a far more dangerous psychic experience than your standard blood-and-gore epic). For years known only through a few appalling, virtually unwatchable bootleg videocassettes circulating among the more ardent and obsessive horror fans, it finally emerged on DVD in 2002 in a deluxe edition that brings it as close to a sane and auditory clarity as humanity possible, given the ruins of material and the technical limitations of the original.

Terry Hawkins is a filmmaker sick of producing standard horror for his asshole producer who decides to make a small film. Assembling a crew of sympathetic associates and choosing as his location a mouldering, empty house with an overwrought Gothic facade and rooms after rooms of bare-walled decay, Terry invites his 'cast' to join the party. Once assembled, these

cast members (all of whom have pissed Terry off in one way or another) are disinclined to play along, the victims are chased, confined, beaten, mentally assaulted and physically tortured, all the while being subjected to a verbal barrage of contempt from the director. It's no spoiler if I tell you that they don't live happily after. I'm merely directing your attention to the film's title which for once has a clear and direct relevance to events chronically. The title was concocted by a subsequent distributor replacing the blackly comic original, *The Cuckoo Clock of Hell*, which Watkins appears very close from a story by Karl Vonnegut entitled *Walter Night*.

For lovers of cinema extremes, *The Last House on Dead End Street* is the new deal. Everything about it gives off a forbidding hostile vibe, a malignant causticity that sends your loquacious meter



Humiliation, mutilation and ultimate death skills essential for lord of the...
on...
on...
on...

The Last House on Dead End Street
did play as The Fun House for a...

IT'S BACK! THE EVIL THAT HAD YOU SCREAMING!
IT'S ONLY
A MOVIE!

LAST HOUSE

ON
DEAD
END

STREET

Directed by VICTOR JANOS • COLOR (RESTRICTED)

have one. Of course the symbols I've given could yield a far more conventional film. What is its unique state? The aura of pure hate that oozes from every pore of the project. I can think of no other feature film that so relentlessly portrays such apocalyptic nihilism. You have to look to music for a parallel: there's a proto-punk sensibility there, well ahead of the curve in 1973. Although the Sex Pistols were musically banal, Johnny Rotten was the first 'rock star' to achieve mainstream notoriety entirely on the basis of an attitude of negation, hostility and scorn. Before that, such feelings found expression

in the lyrics of Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention (occasional garage-punk single from the 60s like "No Escape by the Seeds '46 Tears by" and the Mothers' "Shut Up by The Mothers"). But Zappa used humour too, and his attitude encompassed a scathingly funny to stoned students but never did anything for

moments where you laugh out loud; but it's the laughter of

just such a state, with two fellow speed-freaks, Chris Barber and Crum Pettit (see *The Eyeball Compendium*). It was the late 60s when we would seek out the nastiest DIT movies to see with amphetamine psychosis. We'd keep up three and were entering the fourth, eighty-four-hours of wakefulness

feelings, wakes you to the hard and when taken for long periods of time fosters a powerful sense of social disconnection. Factor in the hallucinatory state that occurs when you deprive yourself of sleep — such a long time and it's easy to see how a film like *The Last House on F Street* can speak to your condition like some habbiting the room within. The atrocious video copy actively encouraged hallucination, but beneath the fuzzy colour and a started sense the movie itself was seething with a deeply weird and passive energy. The film played with masks at a level, was a notice and status like menace, its setting the entire story from the point of view of the psychopaths and the going on like brutality bringing the worst of all possible worlds down on the victims. Here at last, was a film succeeded in fingering your every cruel and callous wish for screw up with truth. It didn't let itself down with corny music, the vibe evoked between the y and primitive, and when down to the wire the was harshed, red in tooth and claw that a really bad attitude, not by that can be mass marks. It felt like outsider art, deranged, unschooled, but all in

Roger Watkins (we can dispense with the Victor Janos pseudonym) not only directs but also plays the lead role, and portrayal of vicious, contemptuous Terry Hawkins is electric. Although at the time I don't know for a fact who the director, I knew the film. For a moment in such an intensely idiosyncratic film to attack another actor (frenzy while shouting, "I, the director of this fucking film was just too provocative an image you believed") — Roger Watkins missed his calling as an actor — but perhaps understandable. He's a power would likely have been

error to his Kinski, to utilize that energy. The score is a patchwork of assembled

through a variety of grungy primitive effects-peals. It invokes truly malevolent surrealism, which for or wonderful effects — feels like the authentic product of a disturbed mind. What is the film just extra ch somehow believe — seeing a real, nasty film you believe that the been authentically sum of early films expressed sim

and murderers. "New time you want to kill someone, don't do it; write it, draw it, paint it, because that I make are my crimes, only I get paid for them." I got the same. As Eric Siver is a h New York and inevitable takes. Placing the film partially in the arty of one of the I do admit. What before he more humanist

Sammy took over. The use of masks and other symbolic devices, like horns and hooves, gives the killers an otherworldly appearance sending the viewer's mind spiralling through literary and mythological associations (especially Greek drama: one of the female associates speaks possessed by Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt). This is an aesthetic as much as by a penniless psychopath. On the other hand, the emptiness of talentless hacks trying to dress up their dogs-dinner porno flicks with pathetic pretension is skewered in the dialogue, and one such perpetrator gets skewered in a 'hammy' scene later in the script, so art is not a word to lose attention lightly as far as Watkins is concerned. What enthralled me to use the term in relation to *Dead End Street* is the hermetic self-assured world that is created, with every part of the filmmaker's arsenal brought into play to achieve the film's satiric goals. Even though what can be seen today was reportedly cut down from a three-hour version that director considers definitive. It all comes across as a perfectly artful risk. One can admire the savage monomania of, say, the early *Gunshi Kyō* films from Japan, without ever feeling that the word is appropriate. I doubt those guys would care, but Watkins certainly does: an aesthetic dimension is maintained in *The Last House on Dead End Street*, with varying levels of artifice, clever punning, theoretical tricks and a wonderful visual gag involving a character attacked through an empty window frame that clearly expresses the desire to lunge out at you across the threshold of the screen, rather as the tank-burned ghost does in *Hideo Nakaya*.

1) Watkins inflicts a burning vengeance by propelling you towards sights and sounds you've never anticipated, so in a way, the less you know about the fates of the victims the better. It's one hell of a trip, and then I come running to me for the bicarbonate of soda.

Roger Watkins responded to this review with the word:

Beautiful!

Which was a relief. You don't want an e-mail saying "Die" from the director of *The Last House on Dead End Street*.

1) *DRACULA* was pissing me off in the real world as the time and still is. Crepuscular methadone only helped, the matter isn't real stuff, not that cow manure/battery acid shit that's going around now. This stuff was straight from Switzerland, the *Sandoz* company. I believe I only gave it up, when, after two years of nothing, I awoke one morning and didn't know what the fuck was going on. My friends (especially Ken Fisher, stuck with me through thick and thin during the production of the film) thought I was in character between scenes. In fact most of them were busy doing homework for their college classes. The entire crew (what little there was of it) was actually quite relaxed between takes save for one scene... the operation scene. The actress (Diane Crumpton) was visibly shaken during the entire experience... very nervous indeed. She even demanded that the ropes which seem to bind her be tied to absolutely nothing. Nancy is an absolute can't-miss! She's! Because she has never acted in anything before, didn't know the least thing about filmmaking and was called upon to commit a plethora of death crimes all of which she did very well and without complaint.

It's usually very adolescent or film-schoolish (or at least a little naive) when someone makes a film about making a film. But you get away with it, 100%. Did you worry about this, did you hesitate before making something recursive?

I agree. Films about the making of films are generally a touching bore. But I knew this one would work. Like everyone who admires the film, I'm curious about the original cut. If you could reinstate three passages missing from the existing version, what would they be and where would they fit? And where does the existing version fall down, for you?

If I could reinstate three scenes... definitely the one where Sweet finds himself in his own house after sucking the deer's leg and just prior to getting his eye drilled out... a long (six minute) long shot of Bill wandering through the various recesses of the building... and a sequence of the two prostitutes in the park surrounded by little children. The film falls apart in the very beginning for me. I wrote and directed the fucking thing and I

hardly know what I'm going on. The ridiculous flash forward was inserted by the ridiculous distributors. Bernie Travis was a no-talent, show business wannabe who happened to be best friends with Leo Fenton, the distributor of the film. A mere messenger boy who talked me into the fact that Terry and his minions should not go responsible for their exploits, thus ruining the entire film. (as you tell me a bit more about how you put the music together?)

The music was stock music culled from the music library of Ross-Giffney, an editing house on 44th Street in Manhattan. Jim Flaherty was... advised the phrasing efforts.

In *Last House*, Terry seems to have grown sick of working with asshole porno producers. Did things get better for you in that world afterwards, or did you get used to it?

Funny, the real porno producers I worked with were from from guys whom I liked very much. And as opposed to the legitimate distributors they always paid me the money they owed me. This is a major deal in the film industry.

Roger Watkins passed away on Tuesday, 6 March, 2007. He was just 59.

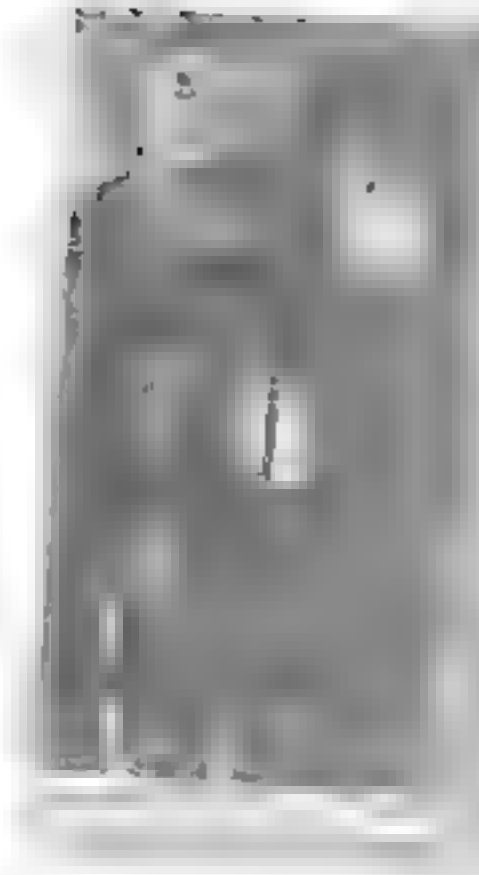
Made in New York & in
see also: *Shadow of the Mind*

LAST RITES

Ammonia Paris (1979)
aka *Dracula's Last Rites*

When the local funeral parlour attempts to deny Marie Bradley (Patricia Lee Hammond) the right to have an open-casket wake for her recently deceased mother, Mimi Wedder, she and her boyfriend Ted, Michael Lady, protest, only to discover that their small town has been taken over by an exclusive coterie of vampires who control the local emergency services. These highly organised bloodsuckers prey on accident victims and then quickly stake them, in case they rise up and give the game away by overpopulating the town with monsters. Sheriff Cordell (A Fred Sington), Doctor Cummings (Victor Jorge) and undertaker Mr. A. Lucard (Gerald Fielding) are all in cahoots, using their positions to hide their unsavory extravaganzas. Thanks to Marie and Ted's intervention, however, Mrs. Bradley avoids being staked, and sure enough goes missing from her coffin.

There's a great premise here, akin to one of my favourite modern horror films of the 1980s, Gary Sherman's *Dead and Buried* (a small town full of the undead, or that wonderfully offbeat French vampire film *Thévenement de Choc* by Alain Jessua (vampirism as an exercise in corporate man management). There's even a glancing similarity to Peter Weir's debut flick, *The Cars That Ate Paris*. *Dracula's Last Rites* has an ambitious score and a seductive, meandering title theme that reminded me of Italy's progressive maestros Góhler. So what's the problem? Well, I've seen three or four times to get into this movie, and each time I've been deceived by director Donjonie Paris's slow-as-a-puckin' and



Roger Watkins aka Victor Jorge aka Terry Hawkins in a 1970s local news footage.

Small-town vanguard in *Dracula's Last Rites*





Paris has carved a minor niche for himself since the 1980s by compiling trash-movie compilation tapes, including *From Muck and Zucchini* (1995), which gathers together clips from various exploitation films like *Foxy Brown* and *Sigourney* with less well known material like *That Man Bolt* and *The Soul of Sigger* & *Harley*. Various online commentators have castigated *Last Rites* for its occasional technical deficiencies, such as glimpses of film lighting equipment in frame, and shots that reveal the scaffolding and wooden struts supporting the sets. There's no denying these flaws, although cinema sitting would doubtless cover up most of these sins, but to call the film home-made as some have done is to ignore the true domestic artisans of cinema, like John A. Intergrate or Chester Turner. *Dracula's Last Rites* has technical flaws, so does *The Shining*, actually, but its only real problem is pacing. Speed everything up and this could have been as much an

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With its emphasis on sexual and emotional dialogue scenes that vibrate with terrible discomfort, *Let's Stay Up to Death* has a brooding, storm-cloudy feel, even though much of the film is shot in bright sunlight. There's a pressurised, morose Summer-of-Love hangover lingering in the air: a feeling augmented by Woody's habit of saying things like 'He re off is it wandering spirits, you know?' and Emily's kindness for picking out fragments of sad melody in an acoustic guitar — never explained what caused Jessica's breakdown, but she has the aura of someone who may have suffered a psychotic reaction after one too many tabs of LSD. The most obvious sign of the sixties is the bearse Duncan and Jessica drive, with a peace symbol and the word LOVE stencilled on the side, the sort of unwelcome eccentricity one might suppose from ex-students who dig the primitive innover of the counterculture. Certainly, despite Duncan's menacing badness and Jessica's sensible air, the film is locals see only the car and its overgrown, cursing the newcomers as *damned hippies*.



Made in New York State





IN COLOUR

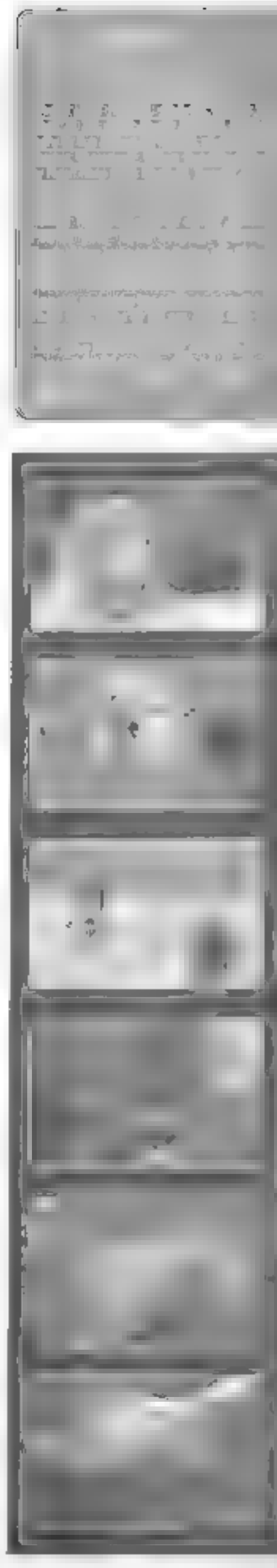
PARAMOUNT PICTURES PRESENTS
A CHARLES B. MOSS, JR. PRODUCTION
Written by NATHAN JONAS and RALPH ROSE • Produced by CHARLES B. MOSS, Jr. • Directed by JOHN HANCOCK
LET'S SCARE JESSICA TO DEATH X
Color. 1974. 100 min. 1974. 100 min. 1974. 100 min.

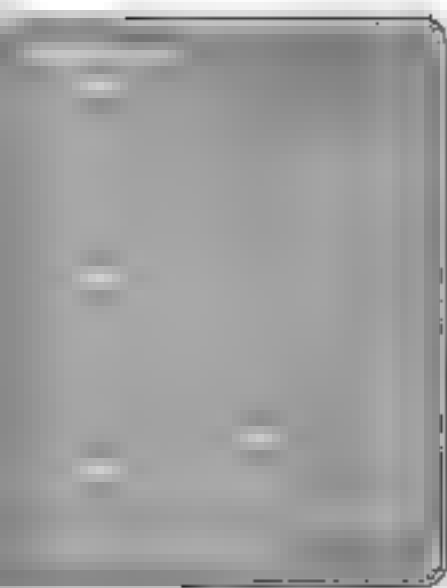
Underlying the drama is a sense of people who are grasping at something they're ashamed to admit, a desire to come down. Hence the house, with its apple orchards offering the dream of a return to the land, and the house, which offers a subtle reproach later picked up and amplified by the return of the undead. Even Jessica's love of grave rubbings can be read as another harbinger: when she reads aloud from a book while in bed with her mysterious husband, it's hard to avoid the implication that marriage itself is a sort of burial in a sense that much of the tension here has to do with the reinstatement of conventional moral codes after the flirtation with free love espoused by the hippies. And, as in William Shakespeare's *Messiah of Evil* and James Bryan's *The Dirtiest Game the World*, it's sexual jealousy that heralds the return of evil and the erosion of alternatives. For instance, as Duncan walks after dinner, an indeterminate female voice-over whispers, "I desire him," as Jessica picks up Emily's belongings, or simply projecting a paranoid suspicion that Emily's "steal her man?" Jessica lights her suspicions by asking Emily to stay, yet something really is going on between Duncan and Emily. Woody detects it when Jessica leaves the table after eating Emily's mild irritation. Woody is a Duncan, "I'm a Duncan," he says. But a Woody really concerned for Jessica is merely jealous that the new girl is interested in Duncan. Is Duncan suggesting that his "nervous" wife see a doctor again because he loves her or is he simply tired of living with her? Frustrated, and hoping to get rid of her so he can have a clean slate at Emily? The film's emotional dilemma is fraught with such questions. By giving everyone ambiguous motivations it takes on a literary quality, echoing Henry James's *The Turn of Mind*.

But all that the film had to offer was a drama of marital paranoia, it would scarcely count as a horror film. Woody makes work magnificently as horror, even before the story tilts overtly

the thriller, is the handling of location and the exemplary use of sound. The exterior filming by cinematographer Robert Hardwin is often both achingly ominous and startlingly beautiful in its river-crossing for instance, or the dew-soaked morning ritual in the house, not to mention numerous scenes in, on and around an obscurely unsettling lake. Water provides a link to the drowning of Abigail Bishop, but also suggests another world alongside ours, where different physical laws apply. Sound-wise, Hancock turns the time-honored practice of post-synching to his advantage by having the voice-over delivered close naked and with voice giving Jessica's interiority an intimate and claustrophobic quality. It feels somehow too intimate like eavesdropping, adding to the sense of Jessica as a painful vulnerable creature. It's as if we can hear her thoughts through her skull. Although the music alternates between the strumming of an acoustic guitar, a four-state piece for piano, and a blaring of primitive Moog synthesizer from Walter Sear (a combination of anti-pops I like a music for Mario Bava's late masterpiece, *Shock*). The synthesizer also provides a haunting electronic wind-scene, blurring reality and fantasy as it curls and whistles over shots of the countryside. Composer can into Sear, did something quite similar on the superlative zombie film, *The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue*.

The horror films that followed in the immediate wake of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) were more diverse than the horrors that followed its sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*, post-78 (although Lucio Fulci's ghastly ghoulies in *The Beyond* and Jean Rollin's soppy Nazis in *Zombie Lake* are honourable exceptions). The early seventies saw such diverse additions as *Messiah of Evil* (owing a hippy dream gone sour meets consumer society gone crazy theme well before *Down of the Dead*), *Deathdream* (in which a Vietnam soldier returns home as a zombie, and takes it as a wrong being), *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (a freudian send-up that turns surprises





ingly nasty, *Garden of the Dead* with its talking, formaldehyde-
 addicted chain-gang zombies); and from Europe, *Tombs of the
 Blind Dead* (starring zombie Knights Templar on horseback).
 Hancock adds his own posse: they're a gang of menacing old
 men who scare Jessica with their small-town hostility before
 finally invading her bedroom. They act as though they're the
 walking dead, but they're not the flesh-ripping sort: they're much
 harder to define. The post-Romero elements are further spiced by
 a mixture of paranoia, parapsychology and the supernatural—
 effective not least because the film withholds explanation about
 the relationship between them. *Shirley Jessica, stay with me
 now.* "Insists a voice in the heroine's head, summoning a distant
 driver of *The Humming* (1963), a film that provides at least as
 much fuel to the story as the undead themes discussed so far.
 Meanwhile, the character of Emily, a sort of emotional vampire
 further clouds the obvious genre boundaries. It's interesting con-
 sidering Hancock incorporates a failure of communication motif, to
 which Romero himself would return again and again: see *The
 Crazies*, *Martin* and *Day of the Dead*).

There are flaws in Hancock's film, but they're acts of
 omission. A certain amount of haziness and a preponderance of
 loose ends is acceptable in the name of the irrational, but it's a
 pity the back-story of the house is not more tightly woven into
 the film, the fate of the Bishops, even the drowning of Abigail
 Bishop, is strangely peripheral. According to an interview

Hancock gave to the editors of *Guns in Polyester*, the girl in
 white "was included in the script purely on the insistence of the
 producers, sadly it shows as the girl's existence in the real world
 (Duncan sees her too) is never explained. Still, there's no
 doubting the overall effect, which is to wrong-foot the audience
 and leave us genuinely unnerved.

Let's Scare Jessica To Death was shot in twenty-five days for
 \$200,000, on location in Essex, Connecticut. Hancock's original
 title for this, his debut film, was simply *Jessica*, but when it
 became a "negative pickup" for Paramount, the title was changed
 to echo such titillatingly verbose movies as the contemporary MGM
 acquisition *What's the Matter with Helen?* and A.P.'s *Whoever
 Slept with Auntie Roo?* Both directed the same year, 1977, by the
 same director, Curtis Harrington. (I have to admit a fondness for
 Celso Ad. Castro's gloriously silly Filipino variant on the
 theme, *Kid Barbara with Panic*.) The retitling suggests that
 Paramount were looking to resolve *Jessica*'s ambiguity by
 pointing towards a rational explanation: it's just that the rational
 explanation doesn't fit the story? It is just about possible to read
 the film as simply the heroine's descent into madness, with
 everything corralled under the heading of paranoid hallucination
 but there is certainly no sustainable case for the film as a drive-
 the-heroin-crazy drama. Fortunately, the film was never recut to
 freeze the issue, and remains one of the most mesmerising and
 haunting American horror films of the seventies.

Hancock, who also wrote the film, under the name Ralph
 Rose, went on to make *Bung the Drum Slowly* (1973), a sports
 drama with Robert De Niro and the great Michael Moriarty. He
 since directed nine films and some TV shows, including episodes
 of Steve Bochco's cult hit, *Full Street Blues* and a clutch of
 eighties *Twilight Zone* entries. *Let's Scare Jessica To Death* was
 the first movie to be produced by Charles B. Moss Jr., grandson
 of theatre president B.S. Moss (see chapter
 on David Durston and his film
Sugar). It opened at the
 Criterion on Times Square, a
 prestige venue run by the
 Moss family.

Made in Connecticut.

THE LOVE BUTCHER

Mike Angel and Don Jones (1975)

See interview with Don Jones

Made in Connecticut

MADAME ZENOBIA

Eduardo Cemma (1973)

aka *Zenobia*

Madame Zenobia is an exuberant, drug-finger tale of
 necrophilia and witchcraft. It tells of Marcia (Tina Russell), a
 young woman unable to achieve orgasm since the death of her
 lover John. We first see her with a new squeeze, her chauffeur Eric,
 who drives her to the graveyard to pay her respects to the deceased.
 Marcia's expression of grief is intense, as she hugs her pussy
 energetically on the flowers and wreaths festooning the grave. We
 soon discover that Eric cannot bring Marcia to climax, and after a
 juggle of sex-crazed friends also fail to get her off during a four-
 way sex tussle, one of them suggests a visit to the mysterious
 Madame Zenobia (Elizabeth O'Donovan). Madame Zenobia sends
 a message beyond the grave to Marcia's lover (currently in heaven,
 hanging some celestial sloozy), reuniting the lovers via the body of
 Eric, the chauffeur who channels John in a rather intimate way
 and at last brings Marcia to her sorely needed orgasm.

The fun of this film is chiefly in the way-out photography,
 design and music. Madame Zenobia's place looks like a *Clackwork
 Orange's* Kottava Milk Bar, merged with Jagger's pad in
Performance. The photography, by Cemma himself, is a delicious
 free-for-all of hand-held wide-angle lensing, while coloured smoke,
 bizarre costumes and lots of superimposition add to the licentious,
 heavy aura. A handful of John Waters-ish performances contribute
 further to the whacked-out psychedelic appeal. There's some
 irritating classical music during the slower-paced first half, but the
 soundtrack then turns to bangas and Furtisa organ for a Tangerine
 Dream-like workout that juries perfectly with the dope-and-sex
 imagery. Softcore sex is usually a bore, but *Madame Zenobia*'s
 sixty-five minutes whiz by, giving you some idea of what
 exploitation would look like if shot by Nic Roeg or Ken Russell.

Eduardo Cemma was a New York-based exploitation
 director who kicked off with the intriguingly titled *The Wreath
 and the Childbirth* (1968), before lensing two porno titles, *Loch
 Zazu's Daughter* (1971) and *Mittie's Homecoming* (1977).

Another Cemma credit, *Street Love*, is possibly an alternative
 title for one of the others. *Madame Zenobia* was shot in 35mm
 and blown up to 35mm. Madame Zenobia herself was played by
 black actress Elizabeth O'Donovan, who was the Empress in
 Richard Burton's *Doctor Faustus* (1967). Tina Russell (Chris-
 tina Russell, who playsinged Marcia, was a porno regular who
 appeared in all Cemma's films bar the first. Levi Richards, her
 obliging chauffeur here, went on to work with Doris Wishman on
The Immoral Three (1975), *Come with Me My Love* (1976) and *A
 Night To Dismember* (1981). *Madame Zenobia* was produced by
 Jason Russel (aka Lee Hassel), whose later production credits

include Armando Gueant's brutal sex
 epics *The Defiance of Gaea*
 (1974) and *The Taking of
 Christina* (1976), and Stuart
 Cosell's *Demons*
Without Mercy (1976).

Made in New York State





THE MAFU CAGE

Karen Arthur (1977)

aka *My Sister My Love*

Don't Ring the Doorbell

Cissy (Karen Kane), spoiled, screw-loose daughter of a wealthy wildlife-trapper, is obsessed with apes and monkeys, persuading her live-in sister Ellen Lee Grant to obtain them so that she may keep one caged at all times in their plant-festooned home. On his death-bed, their father made Ellen swear that she would never have Cissy committed, believing that her madness was merely the 'eccentricity' of a creative child. However Cissy is dangerously unstable and prone to murderous fits of rage, especially if someone touches her. The only person who can do that is Ellen, with whom she has an incestuous relationship. As the apes become the victims of Cissy's destructive rage, indulgent Ellen turns a blind eye, and simply obtains new specimens, and so the sorry process continues. For this literal and metaphorical hellhouse comes Ellen's boyfriend David (James Olson). Cissy dislikes him intensely, and when he comes up one day while Ellen is away, she proceeds to make him very uncomfortable indeed.

This is a claustrophobic, distressing film with a highly unusual story based on the play *Forgetting Manners*. You and Your Claude by Eric Westphal, and a *mur-de-force* central performance by Karen Kane. Although it's not graphically violent, it's tough to sit through, focusing on a deeply selfish individual, with a penchant for cruelty to animals, whose sadism eventually escalates to include human beings. It reminds me of Mure H. Ray's *Scream Bloody Murder*, depicting a disturbed, deeply unsympathetic but well-drawn central character determined to maul anyone and anything according to their self-centred mania. The theme of lesbian incest is perhaps too subtly incorporated, but the portrait of emotional manipulation between siblings is spot-on, and the African imagery adds unpredictability in a genre not always noted for breadth of cultural reference. (See John Ballard's *The Orphan* for another example.)

This is one of those movies that creeps up on you. Carol Kane builds her aces and mannerisms slowly, from 'loopy' to full throttle mentalist, and though the violence Cissy commits against an orangutan is pitifully shot, there are still a few incredibly disturbing shots of Kane snarling and yelling at the caged creature that made my hair stand on end. (I should mention, however, that the American Humane Society gave the film the all-clear. Kane's appearance is at times quite astonishing, as she adopts a series of African tribal outfits, beginning with a look that's more proto-monkey, then becoming dramatically into full fledged tribal marks, neck rings. Congolese costumes and deep red face-paint. The soundtrack features some extraordinary African music recordings bringing to the film an alarmingly intense tribalistic ambience. As for Cissy's treatment of David: while the sadistic opportunities are not as fully explored as those in Peter S. Traynor's similarly themed *Death Game* (1976), *The Mafu Cage* is still likely to chill the undour of all but the most masochistic of males, so if you ever had the hots for Kane as the girlshy-dirty Simba in the TV comedy *Simba*, you may want to avoid seeing this one.

Karen Arthur has since worked almost exclusively in TV, apart from the talker-thriller *Lady Beare* in 1987. *The Mafu Cage*'s cinematographer John Bailey had earlier lensed *Premeditation* (1970) for Alan Rudolph, and went on to shoot *American Gigolo* (1981), *Cat People* (1982) and *Afektum* (1985) for Paul Schrader.

Made in California.

MAKO: JAWS OF DEATH

William Circle (1975)

aka *Shark Killers*

This story of a man (Richard Jaeckel) who loves sharks so much that he murders shark-hunters to protect his fishy friends is more action-adventure than horror. So what's it doing here? Well, he can communicate with sharks, and he's protected by an amulet given to him by an old shaman, adding just enough mystic hogwash to place it in the side rows of the genre.

Apart from that, it's a curious, sentimental drama, which plays like an amoral kids' film, appearing to condone murder as retribution for unlicensed fishing. Much as I personally detest the arrogance of *gudatama*, man vs. animal type, murder seems hardly the healthiest solution. Still, for young teens with an angry eco-conscience that will provide fantasy wish-fulfilment, and Richard Jaeckel (the only ray of light in John Bad Cardin's *The Dark*) at least gets to go over the top a bit with hand-wringing and tears as he talks to his pointy-nosed friends. The scene in a maritime laboratory where he kneels sobbing, arms outstretched, holding out a dead baby shark to his equally dead mother, rates a Purple Heart on the melodrama scoreboard. The director, Florida exploitation dynamo William Circle, had come on a great deal since *Death Curse of Tartu* (1966), and he handles the action and dialogue scenes with confidence. That said, a little more of the madness of his early work would not have gone amiss.

Made in Florida.

US video cover for *Mako: Jaws of Death*



MAIATESTA'S CARNIVAL OF BLOOD

Christopher Speeth (1971)

Mr. and Mrs. Norris (Paul Hesteter and Betsy Fenn) and their daughter Verna (Joanne Corzini) pose as new employees at a dilapidated fairground in order to search for their missing son, last seen in the vicinity. An intriguing fellow called Mr. Blood (Jerome Denpsey) shows them around, but by the time they've seen him work, it's clear that he's not a common carnival barker. He has Thomas, a young carny worker who runs the Tunnel of Love, and he tells her of his own suspicions: recently a family disappeared into the Tunnel and failed to come out the other end. Everything is very strange and getting stranger by the minute (minibots live under the carnival, vampires take care of the business side, and murderous freaks and lunatics lurk at every turn, all of them working under the shadowy guidance of Mr. Maiatesta [Daniel Dietrich]). The Norrises try to escape, but they're drawn down into the caverns beneath the rollercoaster (can Verna's boyhood palinsky [Paul Townsend] save the day, or is everything just too damn weird?).

He's been lost for thirty years, this amateur has genuine hazards: it allegedly played the Southern drive-in circuit in the early seventies, and then disappeared, leaving only its alluring title in a handful of reference sources. Much to the surprise of collectors, a print of the film emerged on DVD in 2003, having been discovered in the proverbial attic and taken to the American Footage Studio for remastering. Extra footage was also found, including some very gory material snipped from the original version by the censors, now included as a DVD extra.

All of which rather begs the question: after thirty years of obscurity, was *Maiatesta's Carnival of Blood* worth uncovering? Well, with a few reservations I'd say it more than deserves a spell in the spotlight. It may share three-quarters of a title with Leonard Krimm's stunningly bad *Carnival of Blood*, but that is *definitely* where the similarities end. Beautifully photographed, amazingly well designed, far-out in conception and successfully bonkers at least half the time, *Maiatesta's Carnival of Blood* is unlike anything you've seen before. Its closest neighbours in outer-space are maybe Jack Hill's *Spider Baby* (1964), Jack Cardiff's *The Minotaur* (1971), and Ray Dennis Steckler's *The Incredible Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mined-Like Zombies?* (1963)—the latter purely on the basis of the camp setting and the photography.

I'm all in favour of plotless horror films, which is just as well, really, because there's not much meat on the bone here (just lots of

guts and gravy, and a few oddly centered things—can I quite identify?). Ordinary folk look for a missing boy in a fairground run by monsters, just about covers it. Like the Euro oddity *Freaky Clean* (1981), it's really a showcase for the director and his art designers to go berserk with acid-ringed visuals. The design team, a Philadelphia-based trapezoid called Alley Friends, pull off tableaux after tableaux of stylish disorientation: a car suspended upside down from a ceiling with the interior dressed to resemble a huge red mouth, a room half-filled with what seems to be an enormous partially deflated racing balloon, and many more marvels best left for your first viewing. Interestingly, the Alley Friends image have proved to be more than drug-frazzled art-school wordplay by establishing themselves in the world of architecture, where today they design sustainable-energy-based eco-friendly buildings (Partners Bruce M. Lang). Alan (Ace) Johnson and Richard Wood Stange have also worked on off-Broadway plays, temporary festival structures, passive solar buildings, and award-winning, multi-purpose, high-rise condominiums (see www.bemarchitect.com—but if you're living in a strange-looking condo in Pennsylvania and you suspect there are cannibals living in the basement, perhaps you've bought one of their creations).

Christopher Speeth should be proud to have made such an unconventional, deftly stylish and dreamlike film, in a country where the horror genre often falls into predictable pigeonholes. Not content with having a bunch of cannibal ghoulsaving beneath a rollercoaster, Speeth makes them silent movie addicts, gathering transfixed before battered prints of *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Several sequences are like nothing else in the genre: a night-ride on the roller-coaster is particularly breathtaking and it would be a minor masterpiece were it not for a handful of drawbacks. One is the acting, which veers from eerily unique (Jerome Denpsey's 'Mr. Blood'—a creepy cross between Victor Horta and Edward G. Robinson, the extraordinary William Preston with his wildly wandering eye and craggy face) to woefully forced and overwrought (the most of the non-speaking playing ghouls and vampires). All credit for trying, but the amateur cast provide just the sort of eye-rolling, pseudo-speed-out silliness that you'd expect if you asked a local college drama class to simulate phantoms from a drug nightmare. The other, more subtle failing of the film is the editing, which can't quite pull the best out of the weirder scenes. A faster cutting style would have given the film more dynamism; the photography and design are begging for it, but although the *mise en scene* looks like a madman's dreams, the editing tends to give us an observer's viewpoint, not the lunatic's. Traditional editing virtues like pacing and continuity are all at sea too, but that's less of a problem, a really good, creative editor could have made this film a vertiginous experience, whereas Speeth, who I imagine cut the film himself (no editor is credited), leaves us with our metaphorical feet firmly in the ground. Of course, much of this is likely due to lack of money: a tight schedule leaves little time for retakes, and not a lot to play with in the edit suite. Nevertheless, from its sparse electronic soundtrack to its gloriously hi-contrast night-time photographs, much of the film is a technical triumph, and in his sheer devotion to the far-side of cinema, Speeth can claim a knock-out against the low-budget odds.

Christopher Speeth studied film under Solomon Wintropolsky (aka Sol Wurtz, best known for producing *Through Savage Eyes*, a series of short films about Native Americans) at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Center. He subsequently produced several experimental shorts and documentaries. He worked for both CBS and ABC, and his documentary footage has appeared on shows such as *America's Most Wanted*, *Final Justice* and *Nightline*. *Maiatesta's Carnival of Blood* was his only feature film. Primitive star Herve Villechazee, whose body stopped growing early in his childhood, went on to score fame the following year as Scaramanga's henchman in *The Man with the Golden Gun*, followed by the role that took him to the heart of afternoon TV worldwide: the enigmatic Tatum in *Fantasy Island*. His career



...er this was unsuccessful and dogged by alcoholism and depression. Health problems also contributed to his weakened ... of mind and stature & he shot himself in 1943. Daniel ... netrich, who plays the title role of Anastasia, appeared in Andy ... 's *Piercing* on 42nd Street (1973). The extraordinary ... am Preston was a book-keeper in a Philadelphia trucking ... until he began acting in the age of 47. He played John the ... in *Larry (or jump or hit The Father King)* (1961), and also ... in *The Partners* (1971), *For and Against* (1972), and ... (1975), and was a regular player on the popular ... nedy talk show *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. When Preston ... ed away on 10 July 1988, the CBS show marked his ... with a specially filmed eulogy.

Christopher Speeth writes

... in the screenplay of *Anastasia's* director. In the Fall of 1974 ... Anastasia was the *Columbia* ... of the ... Festival. Your thoughtful review of the other films I took back ... as very hard on this film, I remember playing a miniature game ... with others, no matter. After seeing an *Off Broadway* show He arrived after hours with Anastasia took six weeks to shoot. There was ... and eight months post-production. Neither I nor the two producers were paid salaries. I was ... 4% of the gross after the theatre run. One of the producers, Walter ... For an in-line producer he was experienced in ... the family relationship and emotional devastation ... after production ... Richard Currier, a graduate of the Wharton ... with special effects and was the ... of a sports team and a paper merchant. The eight months of post-production were done in my editing rooms with Daniel ... as the senior editor. Miss Turner as assistant editor. ... as editor I started on paying the principal ... to the ... and make it through another summer in New York and ... Philadelphia, while also extending their unemployment com ... without afterwards. I am extremely proud of this principal co ... the proof of my selection is borne out by their subsequent ... of which you have mentioned in your ... ghanda were paid \$5 the day plus daughters. Our shooting ran ... editing room. The committee was further ... by the Motion Picture Association of America. We needed an ... R ... in order to have it seen in the drive in circuit. The MPAA ... covered all the cannibalism and we were too small a company to ... fight their decision. To finish it off the drive in circuit ... to forces to make the picture be ... not have the money to ... an extra print made. I would like to mention ... and Richard Currier two of the original producers who ... as much to the production as well as Margaret Turner ... assistant. Elfenweck and Howard Stein at Coppola ... Made in Pennsylvania

Maureen's

Friends Archive
of Contemporary
had set us on a ...
an auction the same
The world beneath the
bent wheels rubber
figures in
candy broken mirror

MANIAC

William Lustig '980'

Frank Zito (Joe Spinell), lives alone in a dingy basement flat, in the apartment block where he's caretaker. Abused by his mother as a child, he deals with his resentment by stalking, murdering and scalping women. The victims are prostitutes, nurses, couples making out, any woman who catches his eye, as long as there's a chance to kill. At home, Frank agonizes over his own misery, and wallows in guilt about what he's doing, but the compulsion to kill continues. He meets Ann (Caroline Munro), a beautiful photographer who genuinely likes him, and tries to control his urges, but even with her he's unable to conceal his sickness.

Blowing through the genre like a freezing wind in the wake of fun slaughter pics like *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, this wicked slice of Big Apple sleaze from William Lustig sucks the rollercoaster joy out of the slasher format and replaces it with the self-pitying murmurs of a miserable paranoid psychopath. Instead of *Halloween*'s immaculate autumnal suburbia, or *Friday the 13th*'s lakeside idyll, *Maniac* offers skunky red-light districts, graffiti-smothered toilets, grim roadside lay-bys and unmanned subway stations. From the first blue-tinted images of a couple making out on an inhospitable beach, to the final, grubby apocalyptic in the killer's basement flat, there's about as much gut-hearted vim and fizz to do this as a night spent slumped in a piss-soaked doorway.

Nutty? What I'm trying to say is that *Maniac* is head and shoulders above the crowd. Isn't *horror* the name of the game, after all? And if you think not well, maybe you need to do a few *Hail Maniacs* every now and again for getting a cheap kick out of murder and mutilation elsewhere. You wouldn't call this a work of art exactly, but in its strongest moments it reminds you of the gulf between the happy-go-lucky viciousness of the horror genre and the heartlessness of real murder.

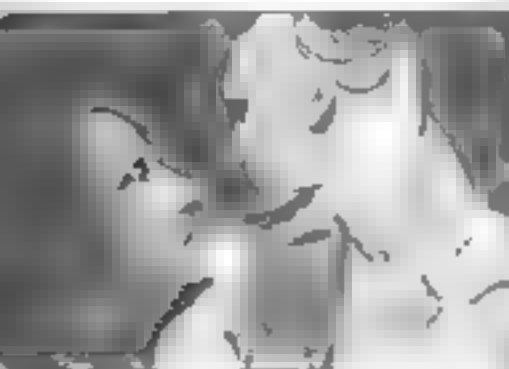
Jay Chattaway's theme tune exudes a defeated, hopeless quality that does up both the killer's squalid existence and the miserable fates of the victims, with the surface prettiness of the instrumentation adding a tinge of bitter irony. It reminds me very much of Goblin's music for another great downer of the genre, Joe D'Amato's torture and taxidermy classic *Bio Omega* (released theatrically in the USA as *Buried Alive*), which was made just the year before. Lustig has admitted to showing his lighting cameraman *The Exorcist*, because he wanted to recreate an interior lighting technique for *Maniac*; perhaps he also packed Chattaway off to a 42nd Street grindhouse to hone up on murder music? Probably not.

but like Goblin did for D'Amato, Chattaway takes the film into a realm of bleakness it might not have reached without him.

To make the cheerier slaughterdions of the early '90s, *Maniac* is going to haunt you, not just later when you're going to sleep, but straight away, as you leave the theatre, or cross town at night, imagining seeing this in a New York sleazepit, and then walking to the subway afterwards. The film feels born from the fear and paranoia of city life, and there's no safety net of fantasy to help dismiss the anxiety, especially for women, who I imagine find it hard to 'dig' this movie at all. The most alarming sequence in the film is the stalking of a nurse (Kelly Piper), who's hunted down a long drawn-out chase scene through an empty subway station and murdered in a public toilet. The scene is brilliantly edited and paced to perfection, toying with the audience as the killer toys with the victim, and the actress makes the character's predicament lucrantly convincing. Also quite brilliant are Tom Savini's grisly effects, and I'm glad to see he's returned to the fold on this one after reportedly regretting his involvement in the aftermath of the film's box-boy profile. Personally I much prefer Savini coming up with heavy-duty horrors like the scalplings and dismemberments seen here, instead of the cute spiny-footed monsters he made for *Creepshow* and *Tales from the Darkside*.

There are things wrong with *Maniac*: the heavy breathing over Frank's point-of-view shots can make you gaggle; if you're in that sort of mood, and the device of having him murder to himself leads to some momentarily toe-curling 'crazy talk' (there's even a monologue where he freaks at the word 'crazy' just like they always do in the movies). But the violence essentially cancels out these problems, and it's harder to gaggle after the relentless throttling and scalping hooker (Rita Munnery), or the subway stalking scene mentioned earlier. The most persistent of the film's drawbacks is the oft-remarked absurdity of Spinell coming across as a fashion photographer whom glamorous Caroline Munro finds unaccountably loveable. Frank Zito (named after Lustig's friend Joseph Zito, director of *Bloodrage* and *The Provoker*) is not an urbane charameleon like Topkapi; he's a drop-out and a sloth. Lustig admits on the film's recent DVD commentary that this development of Frank's character was a misake, made because he wanted to give Caroline Munro more to do. But he gets away with it ultimately: you don't remember these scenes so clearly, afterwords, as it's the grimace and the squelch that stick in your mind's eye, the sorrow of the victims that hangs heavy in your heart, and the chilly paranoia of *Maniac*'s urban hellscape that quickens your step on the way home.

Made in New York City



MARTIN

Film

Martin (John Amos), a withdrawn teenager obsessed with drinking blood, goes to live in Pennsylvania with his elderly cousin Tina Cuda (Lincoln Manzel), who believes Martin is being tormented by evil spirits. Cuda, a cold disciplinarian, refers to the boy only as "ferret" and dresses the house with garlic and crucifixes, insisting that he will be destroyed "without salvation" if he becomes a victim from the town. Martin, however, insists: "There's no evil. There's no real magic even." Instead, using a razor blade and sleeping draughts, and razor blades instead of a knife, he secretly continues his sick nocturnal activities. As he befriends his cousin via friendship with Cuda's granddaughter Christina (Christine Forrest) and a lonely Mrs. Santini (Eva Marie Saint), with whom he begins a first sexual liaison ("without the blood part"). he also strikes an odd relationship with late-night listeners on a radio phone-in show to which he confesses his crimes. No one believes him, and eventually he becomes a figure of fun, dubbed "The Count" by the local host (Michael Cormack). Martin attempts to rid himself of his compulsion, but waiting in the wings is Cuda, determined to deal with "Nosferatu" the old way.

Martin is the most beautiful of American horror films. Although its director George Romero will forever be associated with his indestructible zombie films, it is his true masterpiece, the peak by which his talents as a director and stylist should be measured. *Martin* has emotional maturity, technical virtuosity, and a brilliant vision that blends wit, horror and sadness into something quite unique. It is also Romero's most compassionate work, extending its kindness to a character others might have cast beyond the pale. In *Martin*, we spend the entire running time in the company of a killer, but Romero contemplates him with such loving sympathy that we're compelled to feel for him, lost in delusion as he is. The humanity extended to this "monster" is neither technical nor is it as was the case with recent turkeys like *Barbar* nor unpersuasive (as in *Murder*, where the character's self-pity eclipses our efforts to sympathize with him). You end up viewing Martin sorrowfully, as you would a much-loved brother or cousin somehow sucked into madness. In fact, such is the personification of Martin's voice (rather like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*) that you have to stop and remind yourself he really is a villainer: the first victim has her veins slit from wrist to elbow (it is an efficient suicide cut), and is left drugged, presumably bleeding to death. Later, Martin pierces a male victim through the

throat with a sharpened stick in an act of lust, but of petulance ("You weren't supposed to be there").

The reason we're seduced is that *Martin* reaches beyond violence and horror into detailed character study, while also focusing on epigrammatism. With the latter, in my opinion, the most often but least explored of horror's possible concerns. The film is both a portrait of a psychologically disturbed youth, and an intimate but unsentimental look at a broken-backed town. By finding beauty in the decay of both physical and psychological geography, Romero engages deeply with the Gothic sensibility and then undercuts it with a series of acute ironic scenes which challenge head-on the nostalgic complacency of the tradition.

Right from the start there's a powerful investment in location. A train leaves a railway station late at night; the departing carriages haunted by a mournful railroad bell. Donald Rubenstein's peerless music is both ironically *mitteleuropäan* and achingly sad. As if we've boarded the latest of late-night sleepers on our way to a dark romantic adventure. However, instead of a checkbook, a youth Dr. Northwest, with Cary Grant seduced by Eva Marie Saint, nervous young Martin enters a lady's railroad boudoir only to drug her and drink her blood. In his mind, though, he is a Cary Grant of sorts, albeit with overtones of Lorré and Lugosi (with whom, after all, Grant shared a sinister schemer quality).

As here, during the attack in the railway carriage, that Romero definitively steers away from the norm. In an elegant manoeuvre that is both an homage and critique of the horror genre, we're shown the stark reality of Martin's actions alongside the romantic black-and-white fantasy (or is it memory?) playing in his head. Romero and his prodigiously talented DP, Michael Cormack, deftly integrate desaturated colour and sepia-toned black-and-white, backing up what could have seemed like absurdist formal experimentation with a strong narrative *raison d'être*. The lush, blurry fantasy version and the awkward, functioning reality are both equally well-realised, but it's the clutter and jumble of the sleeping carriage, and its occupant with her face smeared in moisturizing cream, that stick in your mind.

When the train pulls into Pittsburgh, Martin disembarks leaving his victims locked in her sleeper compartment. A proud, unwelcoming elderly man who introduces himself as Cuda (Lincoln Manzel) tells him they must take another train. Looking from the window on this second, suburban journey, we stare along with Martin as desolate downtown Pittsburgh rushes by. When the train arrives at Brookwood, Martin's new home, the images and the matchlessly exquisite score unite to present a vision of pure melancholy, a small town both beautiful and bereft of hope for the



Attacked by his own desires - it may be the only kind of sex he can have



Martin enjoys the only kind of sex he can have - George A. Romero's





"I could be the boy next door..."



ROMERO



MARTIN

ature. The effect is to transform the plagues of the vampire tradition – from images of pale women suffering in the rotting halls of aristocracies, to insubstantial, ethereal youth in the collapsing infrastructure of post-industrial cities.

The film can be read either as a naturalistic story with fantasy sequences, or a supernatural tale with 'fishhooks'. To the credit of many critics and fans, there has generally been a reluctance to drive a divisive wedge between the two possibilities, no doubt fostered by the very thoughtful and persuasive interviews Romero has given on the subject. One could tease out the various implications of each – a suitability for page after page. *Martin* is one of Romero's densest works. For me, the chief interest lies in its realist interpretation, which is not to say the supernatural possibilities lack romance. After all, *Martin* really is a vampire: he is a creature who is forced to live in a universe without God. None of the traditional protections have the slightest effect. Martin chews a path of garlic, kisses a cross, and bounces hared during an attempted exorcism. But although he affects contempt for Cuda's religious hypocrisy, he remains afflicted with melancholia. Instead of being assured a meaningless existence throughout eternity, as a vampire, he succumbs from the banishment of God, he's adrift without meaning, without special powers, an absurdity in a Godless world. This culture of religious meaning is referred to concretely in the film. Through Cuda's arguments with the friendly new vicar of Braddock, played by Romero himself, and implicitly by the secular media confessionals offered by the radio phone-in.

Martin's ability to talk frankly about his crimes to a radio interviewer (who ironically regards his confessions as a clever joke) is one of Romero's best plays, showcasing his habitual theme of miscommunication and his ironic approach to technology. The radio host's nurse is another son of vampire, smoothly coining the phrase "his listeners to provide amusement for his show". He reveals his fangs appropriately enough, during an advertising break, saying off-air to Martin: "Count. How many can I get behind of you?" This is really going to be a big day. "I want to talk to you. I don't want to go down to the station." Like many who call to air their views on such shows, Martin has to reach for a meeting in the flesh, murdered, he hangs up. Of course it is also the case that the last thing a vampire needs is face-to-face publicity, but the situation is, in all ways in *Martin*, multi-layered. The radio host's nurse deserves black humour with a terrible sadness, exploring the complex interactions with others than a vampire I can think of. He is an aggressor to his victims, a

stranger to the citizens of Braddock, a wayward child to Cuda, a surrogate brother and son-identite to Christina, a toyboy (and cat surrogate) for Mrs. Santini, a hit property to the radio host, and a fantasy identification figure to the phone-in listeners. But all of these positions are complicated or distorted. Martin the aggressor is a victim of his own violent drives, Martin the stranger is the delirious boy from the store down the street, Martin the child terrifies the superstitious natchurch in a fog-shrouded children's playground, Martin the 'older brother' is left behind as his enterprising sister leaves town. Martin the last young lover cannot save Mrs. Santini from depression and suicide, and of course neither the radio host nor the clamouring public understand that 'The Count' is for real, not a joke. Finally, as the film reaches its sad, ironic, inevitable end, the final distinctions are blurred: life and death, truth and make-believe, perhaps even death and resurrection.

NB: Romero has said that his original preferred cut of the film was nearly three hours in length, but the only existing print of this version was stolen from his garage soon after the film was completed. The extra material added more scenes of Braddock and its people, as this focus on the town helps make *Martin* so unique and valuable. It is really a crying shame that the long version is lost. Search your neighbours' garages.

Cinematographer Michael Cornick on his experience shooting with Romero:

The opportunity to shoot Martin came quite by chance. During the set-up of our first shot, Martin ambles along the tracks of a railroad line as he walks to his first day of work at Tom Cuda's market. George Romero turned to me (I was to do audio for the film), and was preparing to place his boom mike for some ten minutes and wild sound of the approaching locomotive and offered:

"Say man, I'm tired of shooting. I'd like to direct. Here, take a camera set up this shot. Dumbfounded but honoured, I moved a camera. George Romero, the maestro, had asked me to couldn't believe it. At the time of our work together on Martin I had already known and worked with George for some three years. He

an amazing talent. Always friendly and engaging, probably the most democratic artist I have ever met. In that regard, that he often solicited the opinions and perceptions of his film as he crafted his films, never indecisive or without George used the criticisms and input of others as a ch-

activity and a kind of forum to assess his creative logic. Of found room for the thoughts of others, and at other times he confronted suggestions with the staunch consensus of a director intent cinema. Always receptive to ideas in improving process or product, you could gauge George's acceptance proffered how as he exuberantly said, That's Cool. Rejection (George came forth. Results man, I don't know. Whether either in acceptance or rejection one felt some collaboration with the arts.

George had gone through kind of a dry period after The Crazies, and just to make a dollar we were making sports documentaries on HBO, but we would constantly save time, footage, that we would one day be able to shoot a motion picture using that footage, which we had saved over two to four years to make Martin. We shot it on colour reversal film, about \$45,000, which is very sad. George from day one released a black and white as opposed to colour and that as long as possible until we were trying to get it into distribution. We met with Ben Barenholtz, a distributor from New York and he said, Dumbass, guys, if only you'd shot this thing George out of desperation, said, right, I did. The rest is history.

At the time we did a test market screening of the three-hour version in black and white at a theatre in New Jersey, and the only screening of the three-hour version that print unfortunately has gone. We don't know what happened to it. It has been lost. The film would perform

Made in Pennsylvania.

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MESSIAH OF EVIL

aka *Frank*

See interview with Willard Byrck and George Kutz

Made in California

MICROWAVE MASSACRE

Wayne Barwick (1978, released 1983)

See interview with Wayne Barwick and Ted Newman

Made in California

MONSTROID

Kenneth Hartford and Herbert L. Strick (1979)

aka *Monster*

aka *Monster: The Legend That Became a Terror*

aka *It Came from the Lake*

aka *The Toxic Horror*

Columbia, South America. A giant creature living in a lake emerges to attack the locals, and pollution from a nearby cement works is responsible. The company's American owners send a big game hunter to kill it.

Monstroid initially seems set on being an anti-capitalist monster movie, underpinning its drama with earnest speeches about the pollution of the Third World by greedy American multinationals. John Cardamine plays a Colombian priest, who together with an investigative female reporter brings down bad publicity on a cement-making corporation responsible for polluting the local water supply. You find yourself wondering what Oliver Stone might have done with the material! Sadly, as events roll on, the eco-angle gets lost in the dust, and the film turns into a comic-strip and kill-it-adventure. You just know the script's political conscience is going off the rails when the monster kills a pretty young secretary working at the

company who could possibly blame her for the

... of capitalism!" I guess the monster's just had a bit of a ... the weightier theme sidled over by standard generic riffing it's left to the hired hunter to fulfil any remaining social commentary from the story by performing heroically and wasting time with some airborne helicopter hoppla. There's a final shot of monster eggs on the lakeshore that simply plays the obvious evolution on its face, but it's hardly the sustained attack on big business greed the first reel was promising. The monster itself is kind of cute for what it's worth, but given the Japanese Godzilla movies, it's hardly groundbreaking. (Someone at least went to a lot of trouble to sculpt a realistic giant claw for the first monster attack, a pity that the full monty, so to speak, doesn't live up to it.)

Monstroid was shot in Columbia and New Mexico, but was not a Colombian co-production. Pinning exactly when it was made is quite difficult: the first mention of the film being in production came with a promo set report in *Variety* (October 1975). Two years later, in October 1977, it was still listed as in production by *The Hollywood Reporter*. Another year later, in January 1978, *Variety* ran an advertisement announcing that production was completed. The film finally received a copyright/catalogue entry in 1979. Kenneth Hartford grabs the onscreen directing credit, although Herbert L. Strick, veteran director of *War of the Tengu Frankenstein* and *The Crying Game*, actually shot the majority of the finished film. Credits from some sources are erroneous, suggesting that Cesar Romero, Diane McBain and Keenan Wynn feature in the cast, although they were only ever announced prior to shooting and were never actually signed.

Made in Columbia and New Mexico

MOVIE HOUSE MASSACRE

Alice Raley (Rick Sloane) (1984)

aka *Reel Theater*

The manager of a beleaguered cinema sees his lover dallying with an usher, so he deliberately sets fire to the place, killing everyone. Some time later, the Spotlight Theater chain decides to revive the cinema, employing staff from a more successful theatre to take over and relaunch it. Before long, they fall victim to the old manager's ghost and some extremely dark murders.

Movie House Massacre is located in a strange, unloved region of town, a crossroads where kitsch excess failed send-up and where bad jokes and brush-brush performances try to pass themselves off as irony. As bad as only bad camp can be, *Movie House Massacre* cheats horror fans with its near bloodless murders, while wasting a premise that had some real potential. Just how Mary Woronov's frequently talented comedy actor got herself entangled in this is a mystery. Every attempt at humour ends forlornly, with the distant plot of a stone missing its target by hundreds of yards. The shooting, framing, acting, editing and writing are all flawed, leaving little to enjoy. It's so bad that you feel for the filmmakers, forced to get up in the morning to complete something that was probably hopeless on day three. There's a vague New Wave feel, but a post-punk, not Cindery, but the attitude-free vibe suggests that the filmmakers have grooved on a punk sense of irreverence without knowing what it is they're supposed to be irreverent about. Unctuous cinema Tannoy announcements aim for a hint of *Saturday Night Live* meets Paul Barry humour, but they're far too limply written, and the T&A is chaste enough to satisfy the actresses' mothers. For a sense of how badly the movie is written, try this news-reporter's speech to camera: "We're coming to you live on our opening night, or should we say our grand re-opening. Since its construction in the 1930s this building has been continually opened and closed. With success smile on the theatre or with it stand empty and crumbling in a short matter of time!" Ed Wood, eat your heart out.

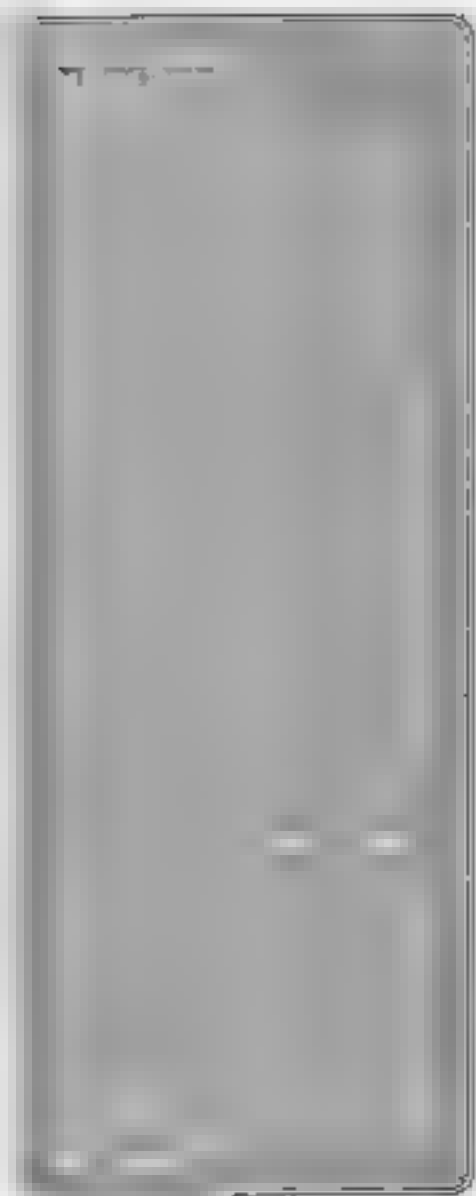
Where *Movie House Massacre* really falls down is in its contrast between corporate and private movie-houses. In fact it's



A vague, lumpy shape emerges from the lake that's the Monsteroid

Movie House Massacre
Martin attacks a woman on a dark night

Movie House Massacre
Two well-designed ogres by Martin



hard to see exactly what the filmmaker wanted to say on the subject. The head of the Spoilite cinema chain is clearly meant to be an asshole, but the tragedy that befalls the old cinema was caused by a selfish manager who murdered his own staff in furtherance of a personal vendetta. There was scope here for an attack on writers' multiplexes, from the point of view of those who admire the old picture palaces, but the film ends up implying that the older cinemas were as bad as the new. Not a message to warm the hearts of cult-moviegoers! Written with a half-hearted frosting of satire that fails to cover the underlying silliness, it's hard to imagine *My Friends Need Killing* surviving an opening weekend out there in the real world. Despite the self-consciously cultish approach, one thing is for certain: it'll never be revisited as a midnight movie.

The onscreen credit goes to 'Alice Raley' but the film was apparently made by exploitation-comedy director Rick Sloane, who carved a successful niche for himself in the late 1980s with the tits-and-trunchions *Face-Brachop* series. 1

Made in California.



MY FRIENDS NEED KILLING

Paul Leder 1976

Gene Kline (Greg Mullavey), a Vietnam veteran who suffers nightmares about the crimes he and his unit committed against Vietnamese civilians, writes to four of his old army buddies proposing to meet up with them again. He sets about murdering them, one by one, acting as agent of vengeance in retribution for their shared crimes. First down is Vincent Gray (actor uncredited) whom Gene drains of blood as punishment for letting an old woman bleed to death. A stay-over with howler ex-Corporal G. Perkins (Clayton Watson) leaves him and his wife Susan (Carolyn Ames) dead. "They didn't rot, they were not goats," Gil protests. A visit to San Francisco to see Les Drago (Roger Cruz) results in Les's drink-and-drugs 'suicide' and a trip back to L.A. to meet ringleader and opportunist pig Sergeant Walter Miller. Bill Michael ends with Miller gorily stabbed to death. But when Walter's pregnant wife Georgia (Laurie Bruner) goes into labour at the news of her husband's murder, how will Gene react?

My Friends Need Killing would be essential viewing on the basis of that wonderful title alone, and there's a good little movie behind it too. Gene's crusade against his old army buddies has a satisfying. And then there were none structure, with all but the first (oddly truncated) encounter revealing the character of each victim before they die. The film was clearly made cheaply (a lot of dialogue was shot silent and dubbed later) but the lead character's despair comes across strongly, not just through the creepy performance by Leder regular Mullavey (*Marigold Moon*, *I Dismember Mama*, *Futurer*, *Body Count*) but also via the succession of locations: airports, freeways, Los Angeles and San Francisco streets – all imbued with a downbeat, one-way-trip-to-oblivion vibe.

It's an odd film, though. Gene is more than a mere psychopath but less than a true moral force. It's difficult to justify his actions because he rapes and murders his wife, who of course has nothing to do with the atrocities he's so steamed up about, and he persists in his psychological assault on Les even though it's clear the young man has turned against the war, suffering enormous guilt that he is seeking to confront through acting in the theatre. Les recites from *Macbeth*: "Oat damn spot! Will these hands never be clean?" but Gene merely uses the young man's guilt to make the task of killing him easier. By persuading him to take an overdose, Gene ignores the man's contrition and shows the same lack of mercy for which he's punishing everyone else. And since the dialogue withholds the exact nature of Les's involvement (was he a killer or a bystander?) it's particularly hard to tell whether Gene's eye-for-an-eye crusade makes intertextual sense. The rape of Susan and the assisted suicide of Les removes Gene's actions from the realm of poetic justice, and the film suffers slightly from this: without these unprincipled actions, the rest of the killings could be discussed as tough justice. It's as if Leder wanted to detach himself from the actions of his protagonist, and so makes him commit a blatantly unjustified rape.

Shot with Leder's characteristically understated camera style, the pacing occasionally threatens to slip into tedium. Fortunately the simplicity of the four-victim structure keeps us orientated so that we don't feel too adrift. The whole thing has a sort of minimalist theatrical quality, especially when Walter (Gene's mean, ... sergeant), momentarily buys into Gene's fantasy recreation of a run on a Vietnamese village and turns him on the ground, as if under fire from unseen enemies. It's easy to imagine this played against black drapes with a couple of props in some off-Broadway theatre. Of course Leder's style comes out of the Actors Studio melodramas of the 1950s (see chapter on John Hayes), so it's interesting to see this later chamber piece staying true to the roots of his early training; assignments: it's just a shame he didn't choose to act in the movies too. Nevertheless, I'd recommend *My Friends Need Killing* (now, what I mean): it makes an essential addition to a Vietnam horror-themed video all-nighter along with Sean Costello's *I Enter*, Bob Clark's *Deathdream*, Buddy Cronin's *Black & Blue*, and Antonio Margherita's *Condemned Apocalypse*.

Made in California.

also *I Dismember Mama* and *Sketches of a Strangler*

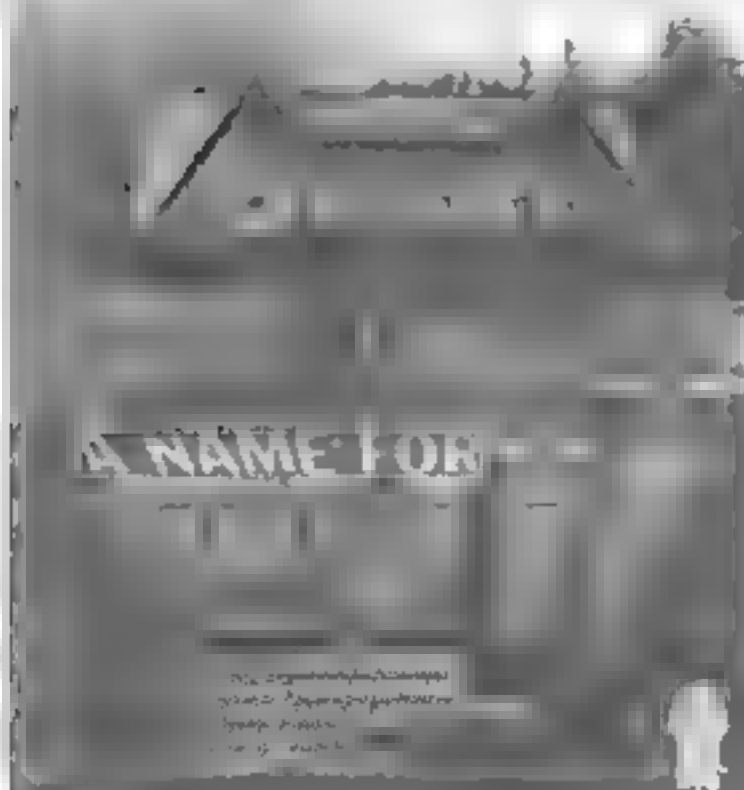


Sheeta Sultan

Robert Culp



Samantha Eggert



CAST FOR FALL

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Jan The Face of Evil

142 The Editors

4 *Same for Eve* trendily takes its cues from the disaffection motifs of late sixties and early seventies cinema, employing a fresh mash of psychedelic superimpositions, coloured filters and artsy manipulations. The editing shuffles information in disordered fashion, while free love and nudity cynically ensure the sexual revolution gets a look-in. Visually it resembles Jess Franco's *Forma e Furto* (1969) but without that film's icy commitment to perversity.

The story centres on John Blake (TV stalwart Robert Culp), a disaffected architect who drops out of the family business to pursue his dreams in the countryside retreat built by 'The Major' his great grandfather. John's wife Joanna (played with great skill and naturalism by Samantha Eggar) is quick to pour scorn on his stand, telling him he's irresponsible, immature and all the other things the hippies were accused of by straights. Joanna attacks her husband's airy notions by suggesting his act of rebellion is more caput than dropout, a childish refusal of complex realities. She's adept at

ing holes in her husband's stance but there's no suggestion that she has anything but comfortable self-interest at heart. Joanna is a materialist in love with her husband's wealth and the social status that comes with it. John's offscreen reveries show what he would prefer Joanna to be: a submissive, adoring caricature of femininity. It seems this rebel against conformity has a thing for Siegfried Wren.

Despite Joana's selfish ball-breaking attitude, her criticisms have some validity. John's posturing is indeed half-hearted. He turns his back on his family's wealth, but it's not a choice that brings any hardship or sacrifice. He remains comfortable, withdrawing not to join an anarcho-syndicalist commune or tour the first East but to renovate his great grandfather's country house. How noble! Change will be hard, though. The Mayor warns in a pre-credits voice-over that he will never allow a single alteration to be made to his property - whether he's alive or dead. Indeed, such is his autocratic mind that he even declares the insects in the grass to be subject to his will.

For all ya counterculture trappings, *A Name for Eve* is a spook

story, albeit one that links the generational conflicts of the classical Gothic to contemporary tensions in politics and culture. It doesn't take much of a stretch to read The Major and his domineering ego as representing 'the old order'. John sees The Major's indomitable ghost walking around, subverted in broken windows, flaring in and out of sight through doorways and round corners. The dynamic spatially points to the dead weight of the past weighing down on John's attempt to start again. *A Hammer for Evil* is a long way short of a film like *Let's Scare Jessica To Death* or *Heaven in Hell*, but it shares with them a desire to rethink supernatural cliché by firing them through the prism of the counterculture. Or is it rethinking the counterculture by firing it through the prism of supernatural cliché? That's the trouble with *A Hammer for Evil*—nothing really coheres into the statement it seems desperate to make. When Girard introduces a ghostly white horse, it's the sort of heavily symbolic image that leaps up and nicks your face. The supernatural steed appears several times, seemingly belonging to the haughty ghost. One night, leaving his wife asleep, John leaps astride the creature which bears him out of the woods, eventually depositing him at a raucous country tavern. He joins in the revelry and ends up making love to a beautiful young woman called Joanna (Sheila Sullivan, Culp's wife at the time). The film takes this infidelity as a cue to dress the cast of their clothes, and in scenes that must have been part of the reason *Penthouse*'s Bob Guccione put up the money, we enter that familiar whirlpool of quasi-occult sexual exporting so familiar in early seventies horror.

It is around this point that we lose our compass as regards the film's intended theme – the steel, belonging to the autocratic Major, is symbolic of the patriarchal past; it seems strange that it should have led John to joyful orgasmic celebration. You are left wondering if the film views such sexual freedom as evil. Confusion therefore reigns as the latter stages unfold. The night's dalliance may just have been an illusion. When John returns home in the morning he believes he has spent the night in rapturous union with a child of nature. His wife, on the other hand, claims he subjected her to hours of sexual brutality and degradation. But the following day John meets Laila again and confirms her existence in the real world. The confusion is carried through to the Dehissy Does *Dehlan* scene: one minute beguiling, the next brutal.

If *A Name for Evil* has a problem it's precisely that it lacks the ability to decide where evil lies. Not because of any trickiness, but because it hedges its bets so thickly, trying to appeal to both reactionary and revolutionary. Although Girard toys with the visual codes of the counterculture, he also seems to attack it. Through the fog of style, one suspects that in fact a rather conservative tale has been rearranged beyond sense. In a terrible, muddled ending, John commits a murder we've been expecting for the past half-hour, cut to a long shot of a funeral taking place in the forecourt, attended by figures too small and distant to recognise. A car stands nearby and someone gets into it, but where is John? Perhaps it is clear on the big screen, but in terms of dramatic structure and pacing this ending is too rushed, and very unsatisfying. Whatever significance the film has been reaching for is lost, and in a pessimistic/reactionary cyclical gesture, we end on The Major's mantra, repeated from the prologue: *"I wouldn't permit it to be changed during my life - why should I permit it just because I happen to be dead?"*

Bernard Girard was born on 22 February, 1918. He began his film career as a screenwriter in the fifties. His feature directorial debut followed in 1957 with the western *Rule One for Revenge* (an earlier film called *As You Were* runs under an hour in length). Afterwards, he concentrated on television, including assignments for *The Twilight Zone*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Ramblin'* and *The Virginian*. He made *The Mail Room* for Columbia in 1969, and an unusual sci-fi drama called *The Happiness Cage* (1972), starring Christopher Walken in one of his earliest film roles. After *A Name for Evil*, Girard made one final movie, a western called *Come with the Wives* (1975), reputed to have been striched together with material from an older, unfinished project. (See the feature on *Menasha of Evil*.) He died on 30 December, 1997.

Made in: unknown (Partly shot in Canada.)



3.

The JK video cover of *A Name for End* 343

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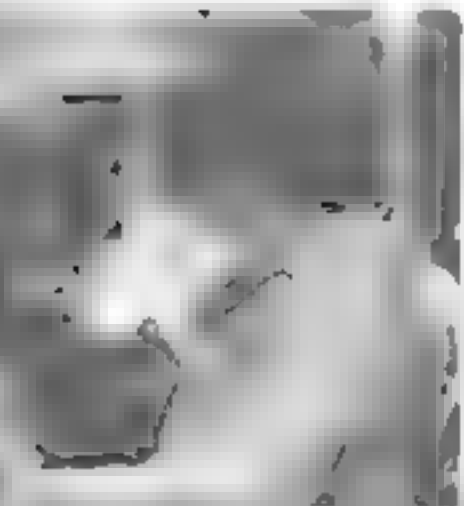
Greg Muller as the disturbed, veteran in Paul Leger's *My Friends*.

Need Killing



Top: VHS cover for *Natas, The Reflection* courtesy of Alpha video who also put out *Evil*, *Berwick's Mill*, *High Anxiety*, *Les Paul*, *Eders Crazy*, *Eds Remember Mama*, and *Robert A. Es Mongre*

Natas



NATAS, THE REFLECTION

Jack Dunlap (1983)

Investigative reporter Steve Granger (Randy Mulkey) is fired from a big newspaper job because of his obsession with a local Indian legend. Girlfriend Terry (Pat Bole), also a reporter, is similarly fed up with hearing about the enigmatic Smohalla, a two hundred-year-old Indian mystic Steve believes is living in a nearby mountain range. Determined to silence his critics, Steve heads off into the hills. He soon finds Smohalla (Nato Cechise), and asks for guidance regarding an Indian riddle about the Natas Tower, where souls are said to be entrapped by the Prince of Darkness. Legend has it that if the Devil can hold the spirits prisoner for a hundred years they belong to him, and down to hell they go. Only human intervention can thwart his plan. Steve takes a talisman and a map from Smohalla and sets out to save some souls. With the help of Terry and a trio of friends, he fights a ghost town full of zombies and ascends the mountain in search of Natas.

I used to see this video kicking around in second-hand shops and car-boot sales, although for years I never bothered to investigate because the title was so silly. But it's an odd little film in places, beginning as a weird, poorly acted stodge, and then stumbling across a few genuinely unsettling ideas along the way. A scene in a derelict saloon populated by creepy, mouldering old cowboys carries a real chill; the customers, the barkeep, even a pair of hookers, are caked in grime and what looks like dried blood, like ghouls who've been caught in a dust storm. The zombie-like attack scenes are similarly startling (at least in contrast with the slower sections beforehand). Sadly, some very loose scripting allows tension to dissipate after Steve's buddy Spec (Fred Perry) is murdered in the old ghost town. The four remaining friends, initially scared and angry, split up and search the empty buildings; then for no good reason start fighting around and acting like they've forgotten about Spec's death. *It was most likely a trap or a trap or something like that, and they've probably already high-tailed it out of here* shrugs Jay (Cecilia), at least he and Angie (Kelli Kohn) pay dearly for their cavalier attitude: first Angie in an effective scare involving sleeping bugs and surprise occupants; then Jay, in an entertaining encounter with a falling scythe (which unfortunately seems to be missing a few frames in the British video).

To his credit, director Jack Dunlap obviously took a personal interest in his subject matter. What initially seems like an odd conflation of Native American mysticism and Catholicism turns out to be based on proper research: Smohalla was a genuine historical figure who set up a post blending the two belief systems in the mid-19th Century (although recent sightings have been rare). Research aside, Dunlap also deserves credit for the mountain-side climax. It's pleasingly fantastical up there, with

smoke hissing from crevices and an impressive winged demon waiting at the top. It's just a pity that the confrontation is resolved in such a simple and predictable fashion. Still, I think this I wanted to be loud, Randy Mulkey—who dresses like the front man of a seventies rock act, even if he does seem more concerned with how to look cool in a suede jacket than displaying the extremes of emotion suggested by the script. Things end on a comical note as Terry thumps her journalist's notes out the car window at the end; perhaps her flourish intoning of the sacred funds was intended to leave the way open for a sequel. Oh, and in case you're still trying to decipher the enigma of *Natas*, come back: Johnny A. wears.

Made in Arizona

THE NESTING

Armand Weston (1980)

aka *Phobia* (shooting title)

Lauren Cecheran (Robin Groves) is a successful writer of Gothic mystery novels. She's also agoraphobic, sexually repressed, and suffering writer's block. She decides to rent a house in the country to try and overcome her personal problems, but, as she settles in, her dreams become steadily more disturbing and sexually charged. In fact they're so vivid she believes she may be experiencing visions of the house's past. The beautiful old country dwelling was once a whorehouse, and Lauren comes to believe that the spirits of prostitutes who were killed there one night in the 1930s are reaching out to her—either that, or she's losing her mind.

Five minutes into *The Nesting* and you already have to re-evaluate your expectations of a horror film made by one of America's most notorious sado-porn directors. There's elegant music (including such a 'Air on the G String' cut off brusquely in mid-swing), the reflexive quality of the story, wide-angle lenses used, for once, to convey something quite suited to the effect—an attack on agoraphobia; all these things and more show how Weston could easily have essayed a career in mainstream genre cinema. Not that he should have, necessarily—his dark-lined brand of porn (see *The Defiance of Wood*) possesses a malevolent vitality that already seems to come from an engagement with his muse—but *The Nesting* is a well-paced, well-made supernatural tale that trumps similar fare like *The Evil* while borrowing from quality fare like Stephen King's *The Shining*.

We first meet the heroine, Lauren (Robin Groves), as she uses a relaxation tape to alleviate her agoraphobia. The voice on the tape asks her to visualise a walk outside, and the tape is then double-exposed to show her teasing her body and walking downstairs (the same method Woody Allen used in *Annie Hall* to show Annie's detachment in bed). On the way to her country retreat, she jokes sardonically about the clichéd writerly escape she's seeking: "Troubled upright writer goes to small sleepy town in search of peace and inspiration. Instead she finds an erupting volcano of lust and passion." Lauren's friend Mark (Christopher Langan) is sceptical when she claims that the house is the same as the one she described in the artist who illustrated the cover of her new book. "How glibly do you think I am?" he asks. "There she is, the frightened girl in the foreground, the brooding mysterious woman in the background." So far the entire fiction has light—but succinctly poked fun at its own clichés. However, the film really doesn't need to be so careful. The beautiful octagonal house that provides the main setting is creepy and impressive enough to work without these ironic caveats.

Sinister eroticism enters the picture when Lauren has a dream in which she fondles herself while gazing into a mirror—another pair of hands join hers and she flinches away. Startled, she's transported back in time to when the house was still a brothel: bound in a beaded curtain, she's made to recline on the Madame's sofa, while curious punters (leaning into the subjective camera) peer at her. Jazz music accompanies the creepier moments, reminding us that what is now considered a 'classy' musical form



was once the music of the whorehouse. Lauren's trip to the attic and the discovery of clothes and shoes seen in her dream, is a classic Stephen King device. In this context, the old jazz records provide a further echo, of Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) instead of a grand hotel. *The Nightingale* has a haunted whorehouse, but the similarities are undeniable: the scene where Lauren lurches from room to room, discovering various sexual assignments and being chased through the halls by the chemist, is almost certainly inspired by the Kubrick film (or if not, it's inspired by the knowledge that a film of King's novel was on its way). The back-story aspects also suggest King, for example, the scene where secondary character Daniel (Michael David Lally) dramatically discovers the truth of his parentage. (Coincidentally, lead actress Robin Groves went on to appear in the King-penned *Silver Bullet* in 1985.

The violence is sparing, which accounts for the film's lower than average profile, given the splatter of the early eighties. The highlight comes when Lauren a psychiatrist Dr Webb (Patrick Farnelly) is impaled through the eye (see also *The Deadly Spawn* for this classic psychiatrist's catch), falling face-down on a railway spike after trying to rescue her from a precarious upper window ledge. This moment of eye violence provides a welcome link to the films of Lucio Fulci, in particular his classic supernatural horror *The Beyond* which went before the cameras in October of 1980. The decaying old house that used to be a hotel, the spoken female owner, a victim falling from the roof, a time-shift between two eras, creepy manservants, dramatic thunderstorms, the Fulci-esque similarities are striking, though in this case accidental. What *The Nightingale* lacks of course is *The Beyond*'s fluid visual style, and its gore-drenched irrationality. Like most American horror filmmakers, Weston frames his nightmare scenario in a sensible narrative format. Thus said, the sequence in which deranged white trash Abner (David Tuck) doggedly chases Lauren, first by car and then on foot through deserted farm buildings, is sustained enough to be genuinely nightmarish, especially since his attack seems so arbitrary. The final explanation from Colonel LeBrun (John Carradine), though, ties up the loose ends in workmanlike fashion. What's salutary, for a film made by an ex-porno director, is that the story is entirely in sympathy with the glossy producers (destroyed by a stubborn old man and three stupid, violent youths), and certainly does not blame them for "the ruin of many a poor boy," as the famous song. The House of the Rising Sun so egregiously pulls it.

A shame, but Weston born in 1937 never went on to develop his aptitude for horror. He was tired from the production of *Down of the Moon* (1981), which wound up being made by Egyptian-American director Frank Agabrieu. While attempting to release *The Nightingale* under its original title of *Phobia* in the Spring of '84, Weston was threatened with legal action by the producers

of the recent John Huston picture, *Phobia* (1980), starring Paul Michael Glaser, and had to rename the film. Some sources have claimed that Armand Weston was a pseudonym for porno producer Anthony Spinelli, but is not the case, as fellow porno director Lee J. Leiby has asserted. Weston shot Joe Sarra's *After* (1975), but he is most notorious for his hyper-sleazy porno-horror flick *The Defiance of Sarah* (1974), starring *The Last House on the Left*'s Wessex (Fred Lincoln, as a sadistic doctor running a psychiatric hospital to which Jean Jennings is sent after being caught taking drugs by her strict mother. She's gang-raped on her first night by three dangerous inmates, but that's nothing compared to what the Doctor has in mind. Subjected to bondage and sadistic torture, tortured and chained like a dog, her mind is broken down until she believes that her sole purpose in life is to submit to the deviant desires of others. *The Defiance of Sarah* is a hardcore pornography nightmare that actually works as drama, possessing a genuine Sadeian quality comparable to Jess Franco. Weston's 1976 film *The Gating of Christmas* is reportedly another gruelling but compelling exercise in the same territory. He died on 26 May, 1988.

Cinematographer John Fernandez was a busy man on horror projects at the time he shot *Human Experiment* for Gregory Cerdani, and *Bloodrage*, *The Provoker* and *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* for Joseph Zito. *The Nightingale* was the last movie credit of Hollywood actress Gloriarahane, winner of a Best Actress Oscar for *The Box and the Beauties* in 1957 and star in hits like *Crossfire* (1947, Oscar nominated), *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952), and *Madame X* (1954).

Made in New York State

A NIGHT OF HORROR

by Malanowski (1981)

See interview with Tom Malanowski

Made in Maryland

A NIGHT TO DISMEMBER

by Wishman (1981)

Don't be distracted by better-known Wishman titles like *Bad Girls Go to Hell* and *Let Me Be a Woman*, this is Wishman's finest hour. Unlike the torpid, attenuated dramas for which she's best known, *A Night To Dismember* is a joy from start to finish, that as long as you love cinema, but can mangle your sanity at every turn.

If, by some calamity, the Region 1 DVD has been deleted by the time you read this, you can simulate the experience thus: drink heavily and take a hit of M.D.A. inside the psychotic S&M freak in your life to bash you round the head until you see stars, then pull back, drifting, from the brink of unconsciousness. So, is with me? What you're feeling is a true analogue of *A Night To Dismember*, possibly the most whacked-out movie in this book, it's a celluloid embolism, deserving in spades the attention normally wasted on earnest old slowcoaches like Ed Wood and A. Adamson.

Most Wishman films merely exemplify the Bad Movie norm. They would great when written up in condensed form, but that's as far as you need to go. At best, a well-chosen highlights tape would be fun to sink into a witch-filled study course on women's cinema. But *A Night To Dismember* is something else: it crumps in previous Wishman opuses by consistently crashing your brains from start to finish. The demented soundtrack cuts between stock cues and muted sound effects, like some *misqu岸e-cumulated* nightmare by Pierre Schneffer, John Cage, or Kenny Everett. Corrupted information from the voice-over vies with abstract cacophony, nine parts post-synch dubbing to one part synchronised dialogue. Someone's changing channels in your head and you may as well get used to it. Just when you think the film has done its worst, an utterly sweet, brutal piece of muzak cuts in, ripped from some late-night shopping mall, the sort of thing you get over the Tannoy for special offers on agnès and pickled goods.



Robin Groves as the writer seeing ghosts while staying in a converted whorehouse

One of two UK video covers by the firm, this one from Warner Bros, who pressed it for distribution after Video Art the rights were



Violence within the family seems to be the theme, but despite a haphazard narration vainly trying to summarise the interminable squabbles, most viewers will find the question of who's doing what to whom impenetrable throughout. Perhaps the best one can say is that rustling away in this masochistic stew there's a murderous mirage involving two visitors, Mary (Jane Carruthers) and Vicki (Samantha Fox).

On second thoughts, maybe 'intrigue' is the wrong word. Armchair detectives be warned: even the unfathomable Miss Marple would have a connection trying to unravel this tale. Characters arrive in the frame, their faces filled with fear, rage or passionate intent, only to exit the scene in the next shot having achieved precisely nothing. The interior of the main house, initially a poky little condo, turns labyrinthine as characters stagger from room to dimly lit room, racing up multiple flights of stairs into our sense of the interior dimensions is totally chaotic. The fact that this is actually Ms. Wishman's own home (as revealed in the utterly priceless DVD commentary) only amplifies the majesty of *A Night To Dismember*'s assault. When Wishman informs us that Vicki's bedroom was actually the guest-room of her own apartment, the mind reels, imagining actually staying there. You can keep your guided tours round Beverly Hills, *this* is the holiday destination cinematics dreams are made of.

There's plenty of blood and violence, but a splatter fan will likely feel as disconcerted as everyone else. Ms. Wishman cares not a monkey's chuff for physical reality: heads are lopped off for sure, but her personal approach to gory war attacks involves a tentatively blade gently touching the victim's neck in fake slow motion. By contrast, some later close-ups of flesh being pierced are ominously convincing (rather like the disturbing gore effects in José Mojica Marins's *Trilogía de Terror*). If nothing else, this wacky swing between the flagrantly phoney and the unexpectedly realistic ramps up the film's powerful hallucinogenic quality.

A Night To Dismember is, on the whole, a 68-minute celluloid car-wreck. It's impressive because we simply can't keep pace with the aesthetic transgressions hurled at the screen. Framing is haphazard; the film stock changes texture; characters come and go senselessly; events contradict themselves; the dialogue cuts in and out like a faulty telephone; eyelines are totally ignored. Wishman and her cameraman cross the line at least a hundred times, with pedantic notions of left and right, to and fro, back and forth, are garbled beyond recognition. For lovers of the terminally weird, it's hog heaven.

However, a few scenes break through the ineptitude. Mary dreams that her entire family attacks her with various sharp implements. Wishman shows the deluge of blows in simulated slow-motion, and for once she actually finds a rhythm for the scene, meanwhile, the soundtrack offers quiet groans, pitched somewhere

between a dreamer's murmuring, a nymphomaniac's sexual whimpers, and the delicious sob of the insane. As incoherent, incomprehensible and idiotic as this film may be, Mary's dream is fantastically vivid and authentic. If Ms. Wishman needed to churn out her entire oeuvre in order to reach this three-minute apothecia, well, I'm glad she did it. If you've ever sat bolt upright in bed at five in the morning, shaking from the aftermath of a horrendous but elusive nightmare, you'll applaud Doris's dogged persistence in finding, at last, the true register of her own demented dreams.

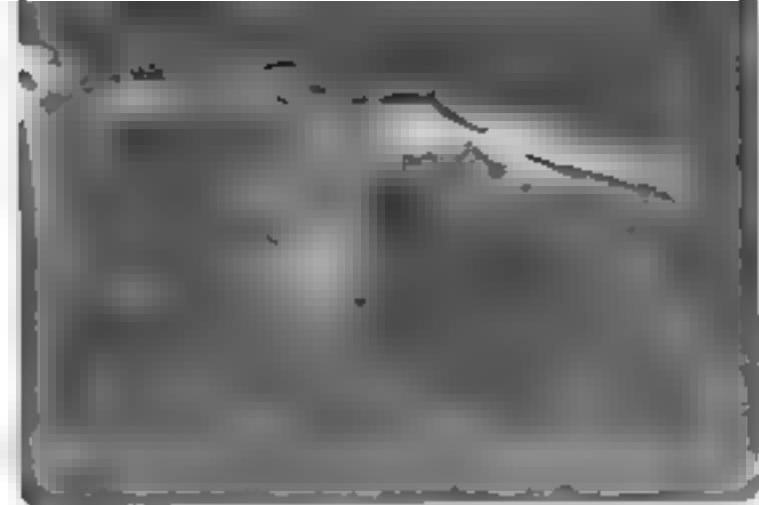
Doris Wishman died of cancer on 30 August 2002, leaving behind a body of work that is nothing if not distinctive. By far the majority of her time was spent making skinflicks of one sort or another, and *A Night To Dismember* is her only dip into the horror genre, *per se*. The story behind the film goes at least some way towards explaining why it's so bizarre. Wishman always shot her movie trailers first, and then raised the cash for the film itself using the money she'd made. It's included as an extra on the DVD in a column that would have floored most directors, more than half of the feature material Wishman then shot was destroyed in a fire after a disgruntled processing lab employee struck back at his bosses by torching the building. Wishman had no insurance so there was no money to start again, but instead of giving up she spent several months assembling a new version of the film, using cuts, outtakes and technically flawed shots, clips from her trailers, and new footage shot as cheaply as possible, added to what was salvaged from the fire. The result is a breathtaking amalgam of wrongness, madness, and so-wrong-it's-right-ness: she even found room for a few shots from her very first film, *Shadow in the Sun* (1960) – typically, a warholian screen portrait of a hideous sofa. Wishman edited multiple unused takes together to extend short scenes, straining for the maximum feature running time; the effect is of time hiccupping, or perhaps the projector trying to spit out the film. Certain Wishman trademarks, such as her penchant for repetitive close-ups of feet, preferably in whatever insane shoes were considered stylish at the time, survive into this movie, along with her post-conscious preference for extensive post-synco dialogue, the latter of which gives her work an autistic separation from reality. Characters rarely feel something directly without a voice-over telling us what it is, or an atrociously dubbed voice filling in for the character as their lips find something else to do. Much of Wishman's eccentric style is governed by lack of money, but it's still a style. She could, after all, have stopped making movies altogether. To continue under the burden of such financial deprivation is a style statement in itself. By the time this movie made it to DVD, Wishman was struggling to mount a new skinflick production, but without an accumulation of back pay for movies already in production, life was getting hard. In fact, one of the most forlorn and moving aspects of the commentary is her frequent sigh of 'I wish I lived there now,' as she looks at her old apartment. We also learn that Ms. Wishman wanted to make another horror film, possibly culled from a similar slush-pile of outtakes – with the awe-inspiring title, *Age of Violence*. Never mind a director's cut of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, here is a restoration project worthy of AFI funding.

Made in Purgatory

STUFF FILE AS I

Don Doherty '48?

A spaceship crashes near a small Maryland town. With the town's corrupt mayor reluctant to act, it's up to Sheriff Corder (Tom Griffin) to save the locals from the monster that emerges from the wreckage. Well, the sheriff's perm has got shaggier, but other than that we're back on the same swishy turf as Doherty's first film, *The Alien Factor*. No mention is made of the events of that movie, though, so I guess Griffin is not meant to be playing the same character, even if he does have the same name. Besides, it would be tough to explain why two alien spacecrafts have crash-landed in the same small area of Maryland. Nevertheless, much is the same essentially, an alien stranded on earth after its spaceship crash-lands goes roaming the woods attacking people. This time, though, the



NURSE SHERR

A Adamson (1977)
aka *The Possession of Nurse Sherr*
aka *Hounds of Death*
aka *Black Vortex*
aka *Killer 3*
aka *Beyond the Living*
aka *Hospital of Terror*

A black magnificat called Thomas Reinbauer (B Roy) suffers a heart attack while trying to resurrect a corpse in front of his followers. He dies in hospital but his spirit possesses Nurse Sherr (Jill Jacobson), sending her on a killing spree: the targets include Reinbauer's black associate (J.C. Wells) and the doctors who failed to revive him.

Adamson's cardboard creativity remains as flimsy and unconvincing as ever, but this is probably the most enjoyable of his horror titles. In case you think that's a recommendation, please don't get me wrong: it's still Adamson. It's still at least 75% abysmal. Sherr's murders are the highlights, thanks to Jill Jacobson's bizarre performance. Also of note is some extremely er, funky animation used to signify the invading spirit, consisting of psychedelic pencil scribbles superimposed with green light (at least I think it's green; it probably depends on the video release). Unfortunately for the hyperactive effects designer, Jill Jacobson undergoes this barrage of overlays with the stoical indifference of a cow pestered by flies. The soundtrack combines forties-styke orchestration and buzzing Theremin, of a kind so out of date in the late seventies that to anyone except Adamson it signified nothing but the clapped-out scores of a hygiene era.

What's annoying about Adamson's films is that they're prone to wandering from their chosen genre to include brain-achingly generic car chases, comedy sex scenes, or tedious action epiphany. I'm all for mixing it up, genre-wise, but with unerring accuracy Adamson works to the wrong recipe. Producer Sam Sherman, credited as Mark Sherwood, claims the film was inspired by Brian De Palma's *Carnie*: a statement that makes sense for just one shot, when a blood-soaked Sherr advances on her lover brandishing bloody knives, shot from a low angle that makes her resemble *Carnie*'s crazy mother (overall, it's more like *Patrick*, really). NB: in a batch that seems to sum up Adamson's oeuvre, the DVD commentary for *The Possession of Nurse Sherr* has Sherman's reminiscences completely out of synch with the actions they describe.

Made in CA, format.

also: *Blood of Ghastly Horror*, *Brain of Blood*, and *Dracula vs. Frankenstein*



texture wears a shiny jumpsuit, like some interplanetary disco artiste en route for a rollercoasteric duel with Olivia Newton-John. The only other difference is that Dohler adds a brief, nervous sex scene and a few hard breasts (presumably at the prompting of distributors). *The Alien Factor* and *Friend* were totally sexless, probably because, as a harder to ask your family and friends to strip off than an actress, as a casting agency), The pacing is tighter, but essentially it's *Alien Factor* redux with extra gore: its itself reason to celebrate, of course, especially the cheerfully gruesome decapitation scene.

NightBeast is really a lot of fun, with a monster whose face is so impressively ugly you forgive it for having no moveable features. If the effects aren't up to the standard of, say, *The Death Spawn* (although designed by the same make-up artist, John Dods), they are still very satisfying, and the characters aren't given too much unnecessary chit-chat between slaughters. When dialogue there is mostly advances the drama. Fans of John Waters will enjoy seeing Baltimore actor George Stover once again embedded in a cast of local Thesps and the sort of enthusiastic also-rans who populate Dohler's films. Thankully though, their efforts, no matter how rough-hewn, never descend into snide or facetious camp; a testament perhaps to Dohler's directing skills, and his devotion to the sci-fi/horror subject matter. The 1980s saw the emergence of a cinema underclass of gore-funk tertiary directors, many of whom without wishing to be too harsh, should have had their efforts shoved down the nearest trash compactor. Dohler, although just as much a fan-turned-director, had enough filmmaking skills to escape this category, coming over as the sort of super-low-budget player who would probably have ended up working for Coppola had he entered the field a few years earlier.

Sadly, Don Dohler died of cancer on 2 December 2, 2006. He was 60.

Don Leffert on Don Dohler and *NightBeast*:

I met Don Dohler over George Stover's house. Stover a 16mm film collector, hosts frequent viewings in his basement. During the seventies, we met every Tuesday evening. Don Dohler attended a screening and we talked about a variety of film-related subjects. Shortly thereafter, he called me and asked me to play the lead in *The Alien Factor*. He said he liked my voice. We became very good friends and socialised frequently. In the nineties, we co-edited a

called *Cinemagix* for seven years before packing it in. Of the five Dohler films in which I appeared, *NightBeast* was my favourite. Incidentally, I needed a double for the motorcycle scenes, as I have never driven one. During the final scene in which I attack the demon sheriff, she scratched me so many times I thought I needed a tetanus shot. She had no experience with stage fighting and actually fought me. I was not pleased and had nothing to do with her after that.

I remember Don as an excellent collaborator and as a valued friend. He was easy going, intellectually curious, and hard working, but most of all he was driven to create. He was, in many ways, a contradiction: he was an excellent writer, editor, and organizer yet he was a high school dropout; he seldom ventured outside his community in Perry Hall, yet he is a relatively well-known movie director; and finally, he was the rarest of all breeds - a filmmaker who never sought praise or accolades. It was the process of filmmaking that he loved. Don was a good friend. I will miss him.

Made in Maryland.

see also: *The Alien Factor* and *Friend*

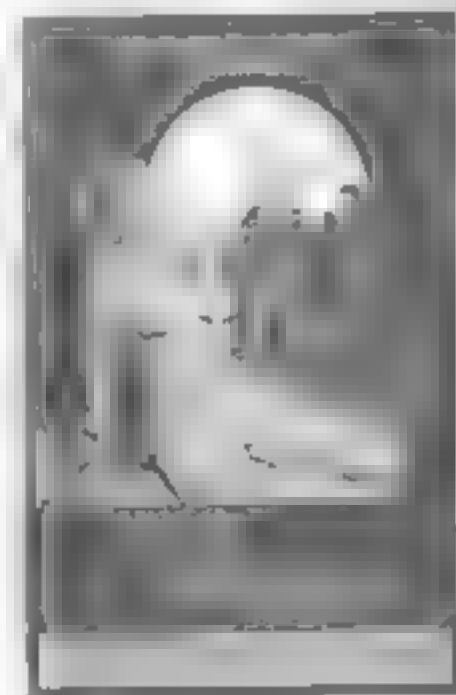
PHANTASM

Don Coscarelli (1978)
aka *The Seven Veils*

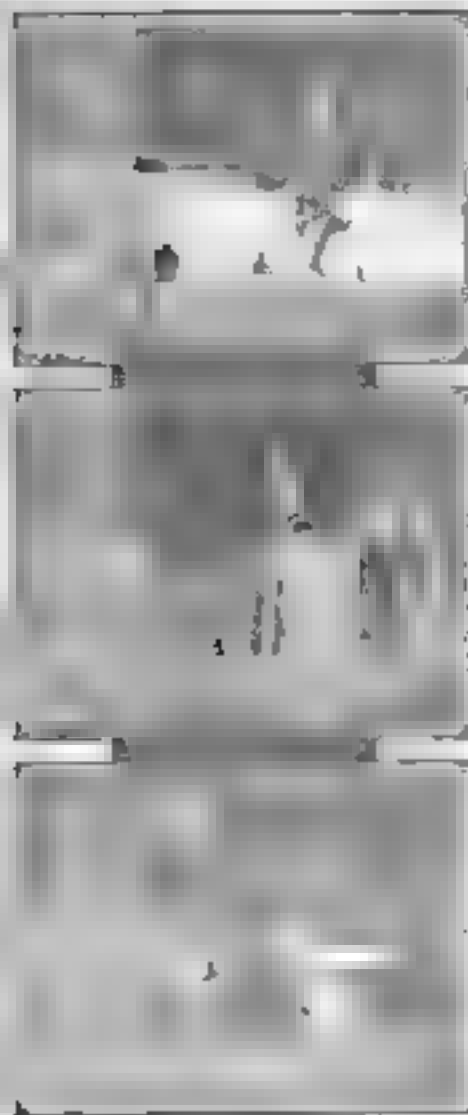
Phantasm appeared out of nowhere in the late 1970s and climbed up at the box-office, introducing us to a new directing talent in Don Coscarelli, and a new breed of the *fantasy* kind of genre in Angus Scrimm's unforgettable Tall Man. While budget limitations mean that the special effects occasionally challenge our credulity, Coscarelli always has another great idea up his sleeve, so that scene by scene we're given far more than the standard issue for horror films of the period; a perfect fusion of mood, setting, character and music, not to mention a host of wild visual concepts. *Phantasm* mixes genres with such smart but unselfconscious verve that it's only later you realize you've been watching a sci-fi horror film about grave robbers from another world. That's right, the same plot as *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. Could this be the film Edward D. Wood was seeing in his mind's eye? Certainly nothing could be further from Wood's ineptitude in this assured and

inspired work.

Phantasm may be wild and off-the-wall, but underpinning the weirdness is a strong emotional current: it's a film about friendship and fraternal love as much as monsters and alternative dimensions. It's this marriage of feeling and fant.



Mind-control takes its toll in *Nurse Sherr* and the US one's set by the



for the enduring fascination the film has inspired in fans all over the world. Instead of the currently fashionable notion that the less said of a teen horror flick should suffice and hacker with each other, this giving the scriptwriters the chance to demonstrate their supposedly waspish wit. Coscarelli's script foregrounds loyalty, courage, friendship and perseverance. Instead of simply setting up empowerment clichés, he gives each of his three leads the capacity not only to face the horrors but also to appreciate each other's worth in the process.

Phantasm achieves an almost effortless dreamlike quality which becomes more and more nervy as the story develops. Coscarelli was way ahead, slyly undermining our sense of what real and unreal five whole years before Wes Craven's *Sigourney on Elm Street* came along and seized the mass market with the same idea with identical results. At one point Coscarelli even goes for an it was all a dream twist, and not only makes it work but gives it pathos, a sorrowful bloom of surprise that touches your heart.

What can I say about *Phantasm*'s villain, The Tail Man? Well, I think, just two dozen words. Angus Scrimm propelled this elegant, looming fiend into the Pantheon of horror icons. The scene where Mike sees him walking in continuous slow motion down main street, warming his hands over the chilly condensation rising from an ice-cream van's open refrigerator door, is as poetic funny and strange as anything in the genre. Scrimm's performance is a dream in itself. It straddles the divide between horror and fairy tale, being both arch and ominous, knowing and mysterious. Far more than just a killer in the Michael Myers or Jason Voorhees mould, The Tail Man embodies a primal archetype: the figure at the end of the bed. He represents all childhood fears: an abductor, a killer of parents, a lurker in the dark. And his obsession with Mike has an almost feverish intensity. Invading dreams and intruding into night-lit rooms, he's a negative Peter Pan, trying to draw Mike (the Wendy) into a never-never land beyond adulthood, out of time.

As befits a tale of adolescent awakening, the subject of sexual awakening is inescapable. Mike, whose older brother Jody is already scoring dates, enjoys the slightly perverse pleasure of spying on his sibling's conquests. But while observing Jody making out at the cemetery with a haughty, ethereal girl (who is more involved in the story's dark side than either of the brothers realise), Mike is attacked by the sinister cowed emissaries of another realm.

On a story level, this 'other realm' is another planet. But on a symbolic level, it's purgatory. Thanks to The Tail Man's activities, death leads to slavery. In a film where the protagonists are teenagers and the dead are their elders, it's not such a big leap to see this threat of post-mortem slavery as a metaphor for the fears of smart kids, fast reaching the age at which they're meant to choose a responsible adult role in life. Many a dissolute teenager has felt a chill of dismay when faced with the prospect of getting a 'real' job. (I should know. I still feel it now.) Perhaps the young Coscarelli (whose parents supported his movie-making dreams and who directed his first film at the age of 21) was disconcerted to see school friends being lured into dull and meaningless occupations?

When you're very young, the promise of adulthood is a done deal: power, autonomy, staying up late. What's not to like? Come the mid-teens and things change. Adult life is apprehended with a curious mixture of fear, exhilaration and contempt. Newly important sexual freedoms beckon, and there are social freedoms too, inasmuch as you can at last decide when, where and with whom you sleep. Yet the tempting sales pitch masks a dull weight of responsibility. To live after death on The Tail Man's planet is to become a zombie dwarf, a crushed remnant of humanity rotting meaninglessly in a void. A bit like working in an office? No one before or interesting has a 'serious job' in *Phantasm*. Jody is an amateur rock musician; Mike is too young for work, while family friend and offbeat hero Reggie is, of all things, an ice-cream Man. A 46-year-old's choice of profession. The extras on the *Phantasm* DVD include a discarded scene featuring Jody as an executive flitting with a girl in his office. Come to think of it, he looks in

MOVIES TO MAKE YOUR SKIN CRAWL

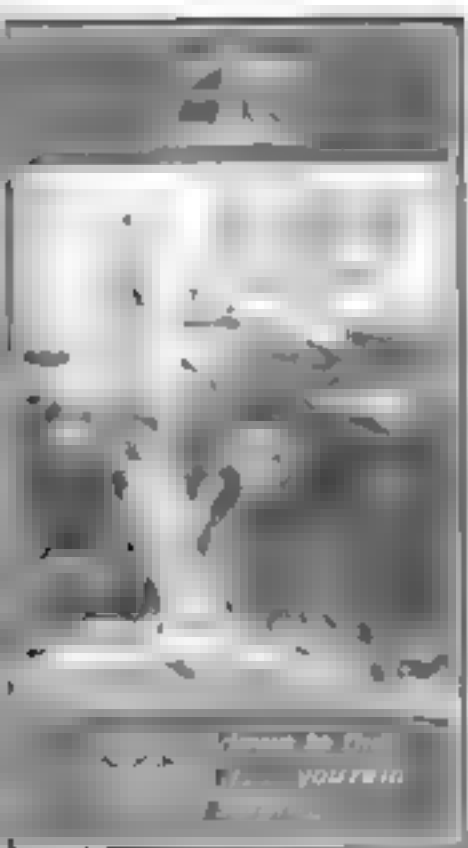


TERRIFYING TALES OF HORROR From Films Incorporated

his flinted revengees business garb, the scene would have eroded Jody's symbolic value as the brother who has not sold out and acquiesced to normality, and was rightfully discarded by

Phantasm also deals with a teenager's conflicting feelings about family. We start with the funeral of Mike and Jody's parents, yet, as the spellbinding music and unpredictable plot weave on, the brothers show little sign of grief or sorrow. "In time I guess you can get used to just about anything," Jody says. It's like the daydreams you have as a kid, of your parents dying and leaving you to live on at home, without them. You imagine with all due sadness the funeral and the tears, but you also relish the idea of having the family home to yourself. Mike seems to get all the family support he needs from his brother, although this is threatened by Jody's plan to move away and send Mike off to an army. Both are horrified and furious when they realise their parents' bodies are missing from Morningglade, but there's no real sense of a hole in their lives beforehand. They basically support each other. In this context, the final scenes are all the more poignant.

There is at least one adult in *Phantasm*, outside of the Tail Man who has rejected the dreary adult grind. The old woman who lives at 'the house on the corner' in beautifully understated fairy-tale manner may be too old for work, but she's obviously too mysteriously endowed to need it. Her role as a powerful witch counterweights the threat of The Tail Man. The old woman never speaks (retaining the masculine realm of language and definition for granddaughter (or is she a grandfather?) communicates the old woman's thoughts to Mike. "Fear is the killer that's what grandma wants you to see." (There follows a brief but beautifully achieved demonstration of 'magic' redolent of the similarly entrancing scenes in Coscarelli's *Trilogy*.) This short but resonant scene in the old lady's house embodies a positive perception of women, against the Lady in Lavender, seductress and ven for The Tail Man. The fact that the granddaughter speaks for the grandmother, as if it



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Tom Lawrence mixes goosebumps with her performance as the terminally damaged Lynn. Lynn craves both forgiveness and punishment from her dead father – a common dichotomy with abused children who lash out at their abusers. The first night that Lynn sleeps under Zambrini's roof she dreams of him as a punishing figure, attacking her with a razor. Lawrence directs by initially withholding a distinction between real and imaginary. The scene begins at night with Lynn asleep in bed. We see Zambrini advance across the darkened room. As he prepares to kill her, Lynn stirs. Zambrini hesitates. Then, satisfied that she's asleep, he slashes her face, over and over, accompanied by a cacophony of screaming and the amplified squeal of pigs, at which point Lynn wakes up in panic, to reveal it was "just" a nightmare.

The local cop is there to stem incestuousness with the voice of Law: "Are you related to Zambrini the Great?" he asks pointedly. Of course, the cop is also a love rival – it seems that Lynn attracts men who want to "help" her in one way or another. Eventually another "helper" – Jess Webster (Jim Antonio), an investigator sent by the Army – tracks her down and tries to persuade her to return – an unusual way of dealing with escaped homicidal maniacs – but this is California. Unfortunately the state of the nuthouse just can't compete with the new man in Lynn's life. Zambrini wants her to stay, so she stabs the interfering Winter to death, only just managing to conceal her latent crime from the sheriff. Zambrini, her surrogate daddy, helps her to dispose of the body.

The film is set in some kind of limbo, an unreal place between life and death (locally Canaan is near Los Angeles). I don't mean that Lawrence employs any overt visual flourishes to make the setting fantastical; there are no swathes of mist or quasi-supernatural manifestations to suggest parallel dimensions. Nonetheless, much of *Pigs* feels dreamily displaced from the real world. Zambrini's cafe-bar sits in the dust of the California desert hills, a last outpost on an abandoned frontier, and the central relationship between old man and young girl feels dreamlike too, as if two fantasy figures have escaped from an imaginary asylum and run off together. A lascivious oil worker – the bar tells Lynn, "Zambrini always gets the pretty girls. They come here and work for a while and then they disappear. They say he feeds them to the pigs." Again, there's something dreamlike about this exchange: so many people seem to have guessed Zambrini's pig-feeding habits, yet nothing is done about it. The unpleasant customer continues: "Let me tell you about him, about Zambrini. He worked in a circus. Ketr off a platform the hundred feet up. They say he was dead. They took him to the morgue. And he came to. He's dead, then he was alive. That's when they say, 'Something wrong with that man.'" (It's interesting to compare this back-story with the plot of John Hayes's *Dream No Evil*, in which Lawrence appears as an undertaker killed by a woman who works in a traveling circus.) When Lynn asks Zambrini about the missing barnhicks, his answer can't be reassuring. "Let them come here, let 'em run away, what's the difference?" Let 'em run. You one finds out." Zambrini is similarly terse when Lynn explains her recent nightmare: "Everybody has bad dreams. Everybody."

The pigs are a constant presence, a force of nature, harbingers of madness and violence. Shots of snouts pushing at rickety pigpen gates communicate a barely contained savagery; interestingly, though, the pigs are edited to represent, at different times, both victims and predator. They suggest the bestial in man and woman: at various times, both Lynn and Zambrini are identified with the animals. As already described, Lynn's screams are merged with pig-squeals during her nightmare, and when Zambrini tries to throw a gang of suspicious workmen off his land, one of them snarls, "Don't touch me. I don't like pigs touching me."

Conventionally, of course, pigs symbolize greed (to the Jewish faith they represent impurity; in Islam they're symbols of evil, lust and ignorance; and it is after all an ex-just, in the form

of a father's rape of his daughter, that sets the story in motion. In general though, *Pigs* doesn't linger at the symbolic level; there's an almost arbitrary quality to the inclusion of flesh-eating porkers. They lack the significance given them in, say, Thomas (Larry's novel) *Hannibal*, but they brand themselves into your memory with a acidity that is its own justification.

Composer Charles Bernstein remembers – but the production was a long drawn out affair, shot over many months and subsequently re-cut and agonised over for quite some time by Lawrence. Certainly there is a fair amount of confusion in the story, such as the question of whether Zambrini is actually a murderer or just a grave-robber – perhaps Lawrence was unable to decide and ended up blurring the point? Lynn's name is given as Webster throughout the film, but at the end her death certificate is headed up Lynn Hart, as confirmed in one of the film's many re-titlings. *The Strange Exorcism of Lynn Hart* in Marc Lawrence's autobiography, *Long Time No See*, this anomaly at least is explained: "It felt short. Maybe it was the ad. Another distributor took it on and then another. They came to me with an idea they wanted to incorporate – to do an Exorcist beginning. I did it gratis. The film was now on its way. The last title it played under that I know of, was *The Strange Exorcism of Lynn Hart*. I don't know where Hart came from, the girl's name in the film was Webster, I heard they're making money with it."

According to star Jesse Vint, actor Russ Hagen owned the rights to *Pigs* at one time and was selling the film all over the world under various titles. *Pigs* wasn't reviewed by *Karten* until 1982, when *Aquarius* played it in New York City as *Daddy's Deadly Darling*. Vint told *Psychotronic Video* magazine, "We were told it was going to be a little movie that the daughter [Tom Lawrence] was going to use as film on herself. In the pre-video days, actors often submitted film on themselves when auditioning for a movie role. It took eighty days to film and I was involved for ten of them."

A contributor to the Mabus Home Video Forum spotted yet another retitling: "I was inspecting the first reel of an unknown movie labeled *Blood Pen* (complete with what looked like a Filmark-manufactured title card, including stock music). It opened with a really amateurish-looking scene involving a priest going into a hospital room as a nervous doctor (looking a little like Larry Hagman) adviser against it. Inside is what is apparently a possessed young woman (who snarls in a dubbed pig's growl, converting with a huge rat. Anyway, the exorcism goes poorly and she bolts out the window. Then, an audible splice, and I am greeted with the sight of Marc Lawrence about to feed an elderly woman in his pigs, and realized this movie *Pigs*. Apparently, somebody hijacked this particular print, didn't care for the intestinous opening, and created this new one to explain Tom Lawrence's escape and dementia. (Of course, the possessed actress looks nothing like her!)"

Lawrence of course would, quite reasonably, regard this movie as a mere footnote to a long and illustrious career in the classic Hollywood firms of the forties and fifties. Born 7 February, 1910, in the Bronx, he attended the City College of New York. In 1930, he joined Eva Le Gallienne's acting company, and befriended a young man who would eventually change his name to John Garfield. They appeared together in a play for Le Gallienne, and for a while joined the politically radical Group Theater. Lawrence was given a film contract with Columbia Pictures, where he excelled in a series of roles as brooding heavies, gangsters and mobsters. Following the Second World War, Lawrence was charged with Communist leanings. Before the House Un-American Activities Committee, he admitted he had once been a member of the Communist Party, and under pressure, named the names of other Party members. He was blacklisted and departed for Europe. When the blacklist was overwritten, he returned to America. He died on 27 November 2005, of natural causes.

Made in California

THE POSSESSED

Charles Nizet (1974)

aka *Help Me I'm Possessed!*

No, not a sleaze/horror Dostoevsky adaptation, you'll be sorry to hear. Instead it's a freaky mad scientist story reminiscent of the contemporary efforts of Al Adamson or Ted V. Mikels, but without the stunning yes/yes/no of the former or the femme-fatale twist of the latter. The setting is an asylum but it's in the desert – or rather what looks like a chunk of leftover dead-row Hollywood scenery in the form of a potently false cause façade erected in the ubiquitous (Benson Canyon, California). The doctor is trying to extract the 'essence of evil' from various subjects caged in his laboratory, only for the stuff to escape and go rampaging around the desert, attacking various passers-by and a couple of cops. The *Essence of Evil*, it transpires, looks like a blurry close-up of red worms dangling at the camera. So now you know.

This is a tedious film that feels left over from another era. The actors are tiresomely campy, particularly the limping, retarded manservant and the doctor's wife, whose wig and costume give her the appearance of a soon-to-be-revealed cross-dresser. The mindlessly shrieking caged girls and a handful of corny mental patients soon outstay their welcome too. By far the most screen time is taken up with interminable interviews between the doctor and the silver PT, conducted in an ugly windowless office set. The *Posessed!* is unimaginative camp that fails to add up to genuine style. It's like *Bloodbuckling Freaks* without the sex, blood, sadism and nihilism. Imagine that. What's left makes Erik Jeffrey Hanson's *ekyll and Hyde Portfolio* look like a cult-classic in waiting.

Charles Nizet was born in Belgium on 1 March, 1932. His career has yet to be properly researched, but he turned his hand to war movies (*Mission Africa*, 1968), nudies (*Slaves of Love*, 1969) and crime dramas (*Three-Hit Split*, 1971), before settling on horror for a while with *The Ravager* (1970), *Insidious Heartbeat* (1972), and *The Possessed!* When Impact Films tried to release a 74-minute print of the latter in Australia in 1982 it was reportedly banned for reasons of sexual violence. The following year it was banned in the US and awarded an 'R' rating. Nizet died on 4 February, 2003: according to the IMDb, he was murdered during a trip to Brazil. Nizet also made the Vietnam POW rescue movie *Rescue Force*, starring real-life Green Beret and actor Viet Ho Chi. **Made in California.**

THE PREMISE

Robert Allen Schnitzer (1974)

See interview with Robert Allen Schnitzer

Made in Mississippi.

PSYCHOPATH

Larry Brown (1977)

aka *An Eye for an Eye* (original title)

aka *Mr. Rahbey* (script title)

A mean, hardass mom (Barbara Cramer) and her weak-willed stooge of a husband (Lance Larson) kill their young son during a punishment beating that goes too far. This and other parental evils are visited by Mr. Rahbey (Tom Hushart), an obsessive children's TV entertainer with an affinity for his pre-teen audience that goes beyond professionalism and into psychopathology. Carolyn Gratchen Karney, the producer of the Mr. Rahbey TV series, knows that her star is both a natural children's performer and a few squares short of a hunkle – and so shields him from the adult world to a degree, but it's the adult world that needs to watch out. Mr. Rahbey is about to assume the mantle of children's protector, embarking on a moral-crusading murder spree, with abusive parents as victims.

This frequently overlooked psycho-thriller, shot in 1972 as *An Eye for an Eye*, is distinguished from the crowd by a fantastic premise and a startling central performance. Director Larry Brown and writer Walter Dallenbach replace the usual victim-parade of

nubile screamers with a string of nasty, abusive parents, and with a prototype Pee-wee Herman as your murdering anti-hero there's nothing trite or formulaic about the set-up. Unfortunately, Brown loses his grip of the material after forty-five minutes or so, and while there are still some good scenes later on, the potential this film had to be an out-and-out classic slips away. Nevertheless, *Psychopath* is the sort of wild, unsettling film that makes exploring the wayvades of the genre so compelling.

The greater part of the blame for child abuse here is directed at bad mothers, with fathers either absent or weak-y condoning their spouses' cruelty. (It would make a good double-bill with *Don't Go in the House*). The film is unrelentingly obsessed with

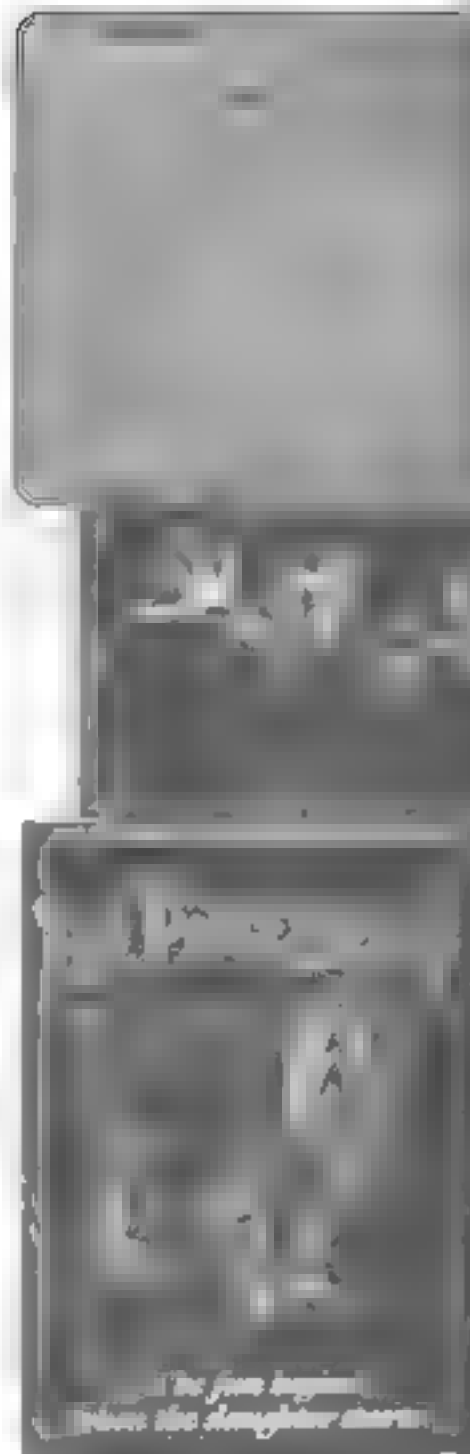
your mom: the only parent we see with redeeming qualities is a father who berates his wife and urges her not to beat the child while he's away at work ("You keep your damn hands off. I don't want her hurt any more. I'm damn sick and tired of every time come home from work wondering if I'm going to find that kid in one piece"). Statistically, men are the more likely abusers, at least when it comes to physical violence – although you could argue that if psychological abuse was easier to quantify, the figures would not look so one-sided. A writer shouldn't have to take a

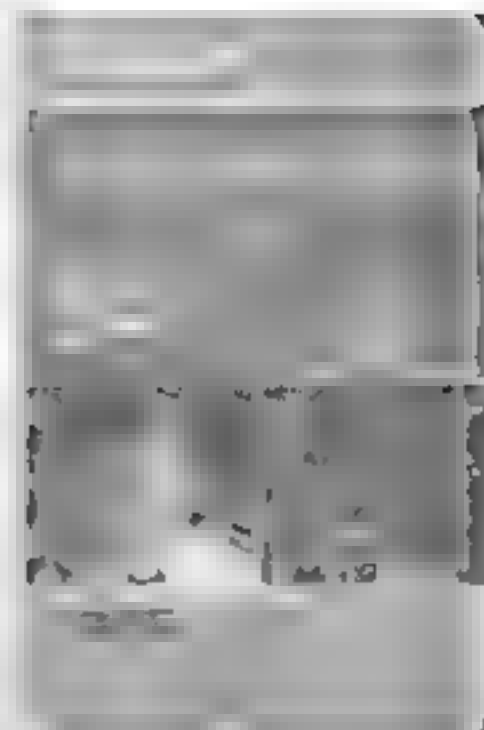
moment to tell us that men are aiming for some specious notion of 'humane'. But *Psychopath* does not into problems by posing the question in a one-sided way. Although it will chime with some viewers' experiences, the film's overwhelming concern with bad means runs the risk of sentimentalising or excusing the parade of weak-willed or absent fathers.

Having said that, there is a tendency to turn away from the idea of abusive motherhood. Most people will flock to the cause of the child abused by their father, but you can expect a louder protest if your concern is maternal abuse. The abusive mother is some would even argue, a victim herself, forced into cruelty by the distorting pressures of patriarchy. Special pleading of this sort obscures the fact that the abusive mother is an agent of serious emotional damage. It's still a taboo subject today, thanks to a combination of emotional denial on the part of men and defensiveness on the part of women. The mothers in *Psychopath* are all completely believable: from the fat harpy in the first scene who demands that her husband savagely assault their nine-year-old son simply for playing in the street and getting dirty, to the wealthy career mom who submits her daughter to a flurry of scorn in private, but turns on the sweetness and light in front of her friends.

As for Mr. Rahbey, he must be the horror genre's strangest mass killer. Soft-spoken, gentle, he's virtually the embodiment of the whimsical, effeminate homosexual. The character's sexuality is never alluded to, but he is undoubtedly going to be perceived as screamingly gay by most audiences. It's not long before the conventional suspicion that a man like this must be interested in children for unsavoury reasons is expressed by one hostile mother after her daughter joins a crowd of children gathered round Mr. Rahbey in a public playground. "Well, I don't know about you with all these children, it isn't normal! I'm gonna talk to some people who have some authority about this. Do the mothers of these children know they're out here with you? – bet they don't and I'm gonna see to it that somebody does know about it!" Her outburst, however, is not as public-spirited as it seems. Rather than expressing legitimate parental concern, she's merely resentful because Mr. Rahbey stared at her when she was yelling abuse at her little girl. Dallenbach's astute observation being that parents often use the spectre of 'stranger abuse' as a way of distracting from their own abusive behaviour.

The moral and emotional core of the film is a scene in the children's ward of a hospital, where a nurse (Margaret Avery) explains to a cop investigating a suspected child-abuse case how she can spot an abused child from their behaviour: "Once you've seen a child who's been beaten, you know. You know. You by the marks on the outside, by the ones inside [...]. People think that a child who's been beaten will rebel, become incorrigible, but it's





Psychopath

not the opposite [...]. I'd think what's been beaten is completely done. He's do nothing you tell him to, just as long as you don't hurt him again. She makes her point by staging a demonstration. Speaking firmly to a young boy of five lying in his hospital bed with a broken arm and fractured hip, she demands the boy lift his other arm in the air. "Jefferson, raise your arm. Higher. Now you keep it there." She turns to another child. "Beatrice, raise your arm above your head. Higher. Now you leave it right there." Turning to the cop, she says quietly, "The minute I turn my head she'll drop it. And why shouldn't she? she isn't afraid of me. It's only normal." As she turns away, the child does indeed immediately lower her arm. "Look at Jefferson," the nurse says. "The boy is so obediently standing his arm high in the air."

As a heartbreaking scene, well acted by the children, and by Margaret Avery, who later went on to receive an Academy Award Nomination for Best Supporting Actress, in *The Color Purple* (1985). It shows what healthcare and education professionals to deal with, piloted in the press and the courts if they over-react, yet seeing, on a regular basis, children with the unmistakable signs

situations, where a child is likely to be to protect their abuser. If it feels a little like a lecture, the clarity and emotional punch save the scene from sanctimoniousness. On top of the realistic depiction of hate of parents, it ensures that the theme of child abuse strikes us seriously, and not simply as window dressing for entertainment.

So how do we treat the film as it more than entertainment? Should it even be entertainment? If the subject matter is approached from the heart. By touching on something real, the question arises as to the morality of bringing an issue like this into the genre film arena. *Psychopath* is a horror film, and to some people this precludes any possibility of seriousness. To make child abuse the subject of a horror film requires some nerve, and to make it genuinely troubling, it is to step from the comfortable verities of genre action and into a darker and more complex area.

It can work. David Cronenberg's *The Brood* manages to play the genre game while raising the same issue, so it's not impossible. All comes down to tone. *Psychopath* veers wildly from real life drama to weird, even campy horror. It's not graphically violent, and it doesn't revel in the spectacle of abuse. The film received the old "AA" Certificate when released in the cinema here in Britain in the 1970s, clearing it for audiences over fourteen years of age.) When child characters are physically harmed, Brown avoids the persistent voyeurism that could have made it all tasteless. What does slightly compromise his efforts is the laboured cultivation of suspense involved in the run-up to Mr. Rahbey's killings. When Mr. Rahbey stalks and kills the parents who killed their young son, the film uses cliché suspense music and lucky tricks like having the husband discover his wife's corpse and run in the car only for Mr. Rahbey to pop up in the back seat in proto-slasher movie fashion. If the man had decided to phone the police from inside the house instead of bolting, or his car Mr. Rahbey would presumably have been left waiting in the car like a fool. We can overlook such things when a film is essentially first class, take any basic slasher pic as example - but it just a bit when the story relates more closely to the real world.

And of which makes it seem as if I've lost my sense of humour, so I should stress that despite a few misgivings here and there, I found *Psychopath* both creepily disturbing and fantastically weird. The innate facial expressions of Tom Basham are laugh-on-look funny (frequent close-ups of his eyes darting from side to side are as cartoonishly weird as *Blood Feast*'s close-ups of Fand Ramses) and the strangulation scene, watched overcautiously, is a boon. What is more, right up there in the Pantheon of Cinema's Most Bizarre is the scene where Mr. Rahbey causes a child-removing mom to faint by flicking her with a piece of cloth, before speering a towel-pole over her head. By the numbers this isn't. Tom Basham's phenomenally fey performance would make Paul Reubens look hot, and it's certainly not his fault if the film can't quite find its centre of gravity: he creates a totally compelling lead character

It seems like I'm criticising this film too much, considering it is supposed to like it, it is because it succeeds maybe too well in certain scenes. Here is a more heartfelt story going on that might have survived better in a less exploitational framework. As it is *Psychopath* is located on one of cinema's fault lines. You can deny that Brown and Dallenbach approach the issue in abuse seriously, but you find yourself querying the method. I certainly would never advocate excluding serious topics from genre pictures, but Larry Brown hasn't quite pulled it off. It is not a bit confusing, likely to give you a case of aesthetic indigestion. You shank about it too much. Still, *Psychopath*'s combination of heartfelt moralism, wacko acting and bizarre murders makes it an unforgettable one-off movie experience. And the ending is a good, solid act of audience provocation to argue about afterwards. The film climaxes with an act of matricide. Hahaha it is sort of *I Spit on Your Grave* for battered kids - which is no bad thing in my book!

On the technical side, the biggest asset to the production is "Country A. Ross" - he provides a wonderful score whose central theme for clavier and walt-wah guitar haunted me for days after. Cinematographer Jack Becken shot *A Scream in the Streets* and *Lagery of Blood* for Carl Monson, and James Bryan, the director of *Don't Go to the Woods* with up as sound editor. (Note: there is another Larry G. Brown out there, director of an eighties movie called *Love & Me*.)

Walter Dallenbach, the writer of *Psychopath*, began as a TV journalist before going on to write for television, including *The Rockford Files*, *Hart to Hart* and *Law & Order*. He teaches a co-educating workshop for Adult Education in Santa Barbara.

I'd been working in radio and TV in Pennsylvania, and then I went to USC around 1963-64 for graduate work, and that's where I met Larry. He was a student in the theatre department. A few years later I was just starting to break into television, around 1971, he came to me and asked if I would be interested in making a film with him, extremely low budget." I said sure, depends what the film is about, so we started talking. Tom Basham also went to USC and he was a good friend of Larry's. Tom was kind of a strange dude [laughs] and Larry thought that was something that would come over in the picture. After spending time with him, and watching him with his "Rabbit" - he actually has a Rabbit! I realised this was a truly bizarre character. [Note: Dallenbach is referring to the piece of cloth or "Rabbit" that Mr. Rahbey carries everywhere with him in the movie. I don't know if you ever saw a thing called Mister Rogers' "Neighborhood"? The host was a soft spoken bizarre guy, kids loved him, but there was something a bit off for me as an adult, something weird. It suddenly came to me talking to Tom, that there was something to be done with that."

How did Basham feel about having his personal "quirks" drawn upon to create a movie psychopath?

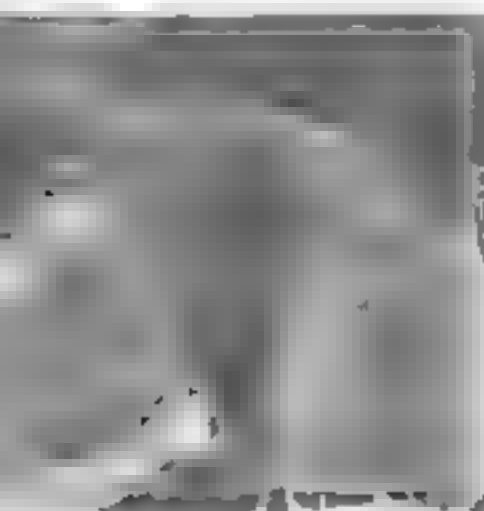
Good question! [Laughs] I tend to think he was actually pleased that he could do this kind of character. I never got it to me that he resented that it was being channelled into a psychotic personality. He played it to the hilt. He resented Larry implicitly. Larry wanted to do something with Tom Basham, and something to do with the horror genre. I came up with what I thought would be an interesting idea about this television personality, with a revenge thing to it. I went out and researched at children's hospitals, and then built the story. I must say though that a lot of the macabre effects were really Larry's idea. He was very good at that, the head in the garage, for instance. Some of his suggestions about how he wanted to kill these people I was saving. Hoh! Christ - you know. But he was right. And the naiveté of "Mr. Rahbey"? Was it part of Tom Basham's character, or was it part of his act?

Well, he had a bit of that about him. After all, he was an actor, and actors have a certain child-likeness about them. I don't know the background to his family but obviously he was somewhat wounded, but he was not a nuts person, just bizarre.

accompany bottom right from the top
Renaire aquatic reptile frog apparently
of Karen Williams' where did

American gun policy vindicated? A child fights
of a fast green monster
the professor value from Mr. Rebene

10. Rahbey has plans for these shapes in





limbles. Bereaved brother Mark Gray is meant to be an actor, but it's a wonder his real life surrogate ever worked at a reaction to the gory death of his aunt and her nurse is limited to a gasp of disturbance of the lips, as if he's attempting to burp while making a rude noise. The police lieutenant is no better, attacked by vampire ghoul in the church crypt, he utterly fails to entice us as if the fake teeth and ketchup "blood" offend his Thespian vanity. More than all these shortcomings, though, it's the editing that gives *Satan's Black Wedding* its terrible stamp of seventies lunacy. For instance, Mark's favorite Jean is attacked by the vampire Nina, but her credible promise of screaming horror is senselessly intercut with a shot of a rushing stream, while the sound glitches and jumps capriciously. To be fair, I suspect at least some of the film's editing flaws are due to a heavy-handed cut made for American audiences, enough blood and gore to suggest that the killings are direct, but the running time may have been truncated by a too distributor aiming to pick up the pace of his acquisition. The plot finally hinges on incest: "Satan himself will rise and marry you and Nina," Father Daken informs Mark. By human standards your offspring will be horribly deformed. Nick saw the brother and sister playing together in the graveyard as children, and thought they'd make a lovely couple. Mark is not so sure he wants an incestuous necrophilia. Satan's wedding and makes a run for it, but Satan, in league with the film's editor, conspires to thwart his escape, in a rankly befuddling climax.

Satan's Black Wedding was the first in a series of Nick and Nina produced by the director's mother Frances Mulford, aka Tamara Brown, for her own production company R.M. Films. Mulford is sometimes credited as Philip Miller, Nick Philips, and Nick Phillips.

Made in California
see also "Criminally Insane"

SATAN'S CHEERLEADERS

Directed: Clark (1977)

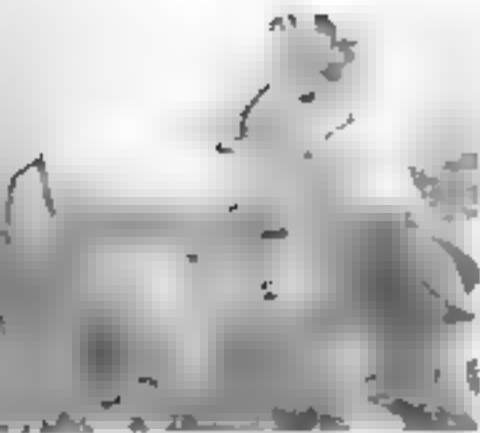
The sort of film that ten years later will be exaggerated into a medium by Empire Pictures and Troma, this (or at its bubblehead effervescence) is a surprisingly enjoyable romp. It might seem the height of piqueness to stick up for *Satan's Cheerleaders* against the likes of *Chopper Chick in Zombietown* (1989), and I should make it clear there's only a Razzie-noper's difference between them, but true distinctions are what being a connoisseur is all about, right?

Partially at least, it's a matter of the decade in which the film was made. Shot in 1977 by B-movie stalwart Greydon Clark, *Satan's Cheerleaders* happily pre-dates the extravagant self-aggrandizing of its eighties variants. There's no pretension either mind you, not an lurking around in the undergrowth, no it's less a haunted flat from the title... The film wants purely to provide a few laughs, and its viewers with glimpses of girls asses bursting from leotard seams, and grunted onto a few simple horror riffs. Clark sets the genre engine pretty hard later on, but takes ten minutes out at the beginning to show us the four principal girls: Chris (Hillary Horne), Sharon (Sherry Markst), Debbie (Aussa Powell) and Pat (Kerry Sherman) cavorting around on the beach with a couple of guys from the football team, while the coach (Joseph Currie) tries to prevent his boys from expending their energy. *Heads down* will be ambitious temptresses (and yes, the script really does quote *On Strangelove*). The girls are smart-mouthed, with a tireless capacity for sexual innuendo, but they're less cruel than their peers in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* and a shade less hip than Laurie Strode's ill-fated friends in *Halloween*, two female-dominated horror films of roughly the same period. Their strength lies in their friendship, as seen in a sequence where they cheerfully initiate what almost turns into a gang-rape of a bemused jock on the soccer field yet it's girl power twenty years early, emblazoned on the story with the subtlety of a T-shirt emblem. The film is hardly for boys of course, but Clark is cunning enough to ensure that girlfriends can get a kick out of it.

above "Black Wedding" and "Satan's Black Wedding"
Black Wedding and Satan's Cheerleaders
in a pulse

opposite "Black Wedding" and "Satan's Black Wedding"
Black Wedding and Satan's Cheerleaders
in a pulse

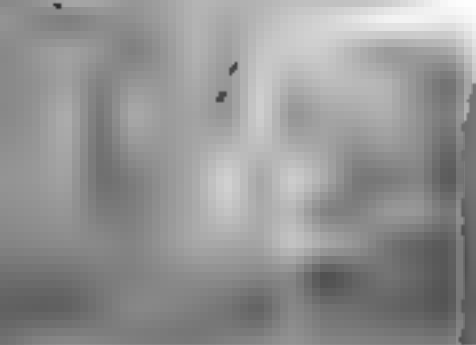




above: John Carradine and Alisa Powell in *John's Cheerleaders*

below: May gone and screaming from *The Scaremaker*

bottom left: The Scaremaker also played *Scare* as *Girl's Nite Out*, as this ultra-



With the introduction of a middle-aged, sexually frustrated school caretaker (Jack Kruschen), the film sets up its real line of opposition. The tension is between teenagers and adults, the Satanists are mainly hitler and twisted old men, lustful after unattainable pathos. There's also a town-and-country thing going down, with hip urbanised schoolgirls versus derisive backwoods yokels, presided over by corrupt sheriff (John Ireland) and blowsy Satanist matriarch Yvonne De Carlo. The girls flirt with every man they meet, even John Carradine (here playing a tramp whose purported knowledge of devilish secrets is never elaborated by the script). As per usual, Carradine is just a background totem, a "really-male in the backcountry sense" he was probably only on set for a day.

Once the film gets rolling, it's actually quite surprising how much more exciting things become. The girls' flight from the Satanist sheriff (but a countryside crawling with coven-members) offers twenty minutes of good, efficient scares. One girl tries to use a public phone at the edge of a Hicksville town, only to be surrounded by menacing humpkins. Another is corralled by a truck-wielding relative of the *Chickie* family, who is a third thrown herself at the feet of a man of the cloth, who is a *father* when she sees his Satanist brooch. "Not quite," he smirks. Replete with fun dialogue (when told her the coven is seeking a virgin, one girl protests, "I'm no maiden. I've been a cheerleader for three years!"), this is pure trash but strangely satisfying mindlessness.

Made in California.

THE SCAREMAKER

Robert Deibel (1982)

aka *Girl's Nite Out*

A campus treasure hunt co-ordinated via college radio is the setting for another formula slasher flick. Your first clue: it's 'The One Where The Killer Wears A Cartoon-Bear Costume'.

I'm a pushover for a good stalk-and-slash run-around, but sadly this ain't one of 'em. I did not like *The Scaremaker* despite its utterly meaningless and, not least, because the cast are the most likable bunch of beavers since the International Moral Society held a Freestyle Purgatory Contest. The first twenty-five minutes are oversubscribed with the sort of applicants' after-

glashers restricted to one or maybe two per cast-list, giggling dopers, zany class comics, gurning devotees of alcohol, imitating drama students... why, the possibilities for mayhem are endless. It pains me to report, however, that once the murders are underway, disappointment, frustration and unwanted boredom are all you can look forward to. The killer dons a cartoon bear suit not to lend a bit of licence to the film's potential, but he customises the suit with claws made of taped-together kitchen knives, which limits his *modus operandi* to a few manly bits of "kill us" threats, mostly in medium shot. Despite the knives, and, no, not Freddy Krueger by a couple of years, this radical dampens the amusement factor, not least because all you see is at best a gush of blood from the vicinity of a throat, with a furry paw obstructing your view. There is at least something curiously homoerotic (and, thus faintly idiosyncratic) about the suit, with its preference for stripping the male not the female crotch, and two of the most obvious class elements are screamingly gay: it's an act of pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking to depict them as popular not just with dopers and dropouts, but the jocks and jockettes too in this Ivy League college, where Senators' daughters rub shoulders with America's richest Remingtons. I too harbour fantasies of a gay-themed college slasher able to out-butcher them all, but Robert Deibel furnishes the opportunity and delivers a blur of a movie instead. The sex gives the film some extra class by treating us to classic status songs like 'The Lovin' Spoonful's 'Summer in the City', but isn't what this end of the market needs: less money spent on per-music clearance and more on graphic flesh-wounds would have lifted *Scaremaker* higher up the horror charts. Note: the film is set, at least nominally, in Westville, Ohio.

Made in New Jersey.

You know what really turned her on...



she loved to be scared.

Weird and kinky t really got her motor running.



STARTS TODAY SHOWCASE THEATER

THE SCAREMAKER

SCREAMER DODY MURDER

Mart B Ray (1977)

See interviews with Mart B Ray

Made in California.

SCREAMS OF A WINTER NIGHT

James Watson (1979)

See interviews with James Watson and Rebecca White

Made in Louisiana.

A SCREAM IN THE STREETS

Car Munson (1979)

See video in the Streets

See video in the Streets

One of the most stupid, lazy-ass films in this book. *A Scream in the Streets* is a ragbag of scenes thrown together around two clueless cops driving through Los Angeles functioning against anality while searching for a rape-killer (Ron Covert) who is also a deeply unconvincing transvestite. "I hate you! I hate women!" he yells, as he murders his victims. That'll be psychology covered, then. The two cops - you guessed it, a by-the-book type (John Kirkpatrick) and a loose-cannon psycho (Frank Rannone) - wrangle about whether criminals deserve any rights while the script tosses in a couple of crime-scene shootouts and four or five tedious soliloquy interludes. It's a can-the-arsed shrug of a climax: the cops don't even find the killer themselves; instead they're given a tip-off on a street corner by a nervous lady witness. A showdown between By-the-Book and A-Not-Framing ends with By-the-Book stabbed to death, so Psycho-Partner blows a killer-Franco's brains out while sarcastically reading him his rights. The only real highlight is a sleazy spunking session in a sauna that turns into C.B.T., as the john smashes a bottle in the other's face and brushes the cringing thudcase with a leather belt. *A Scream in the Streets* has occasionally been cited as some sort of trash classic, but if you ask me it's too dumb and indecent to deserve a cult following. It was produced by Harry Novak in obvious with his buddy Car Munson (born 2 September, 1932) who directed the tedious *Legions of Blood* (1971) and the comedy sex film *Please Don't Eat My Mother* (1973). Munson died on 4

August, 1988. Note: The M.B. alleges that Dwayne Avery was an uncredited co-director; apparently there are three people in the world willing to put their name to this movie.

The film's most bizarre costume, its weird, unconvincing killer transvestite, has echoes of the Jerry Brudos case of 1969 - when a young woman went missing in Portland, Oregon, shoppers described seeing a very tall, strange-looking female hanging about the area where the victim disappeared. A witness who got closer realised that it was actually a man in drag. Brudos was apprehended later that year and found to be both a shoe fetishist and occasional transvestite. He did not, however, attack women while in female garb). Horror films like *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill* and *A Scream in the Streets* have depicted cross-dressers as psychotic slashers who hate women. In fact, transvestites are generally non-violent. If they do commit violent acts, their fetish is generally incidental, not causal. For another dose of intriguing transvestite action, see *Sometimes Aunt Martha Does Deviant Things*.

Made in California.

THE SEVERED ARM

Thomas S. Muerman (1972)

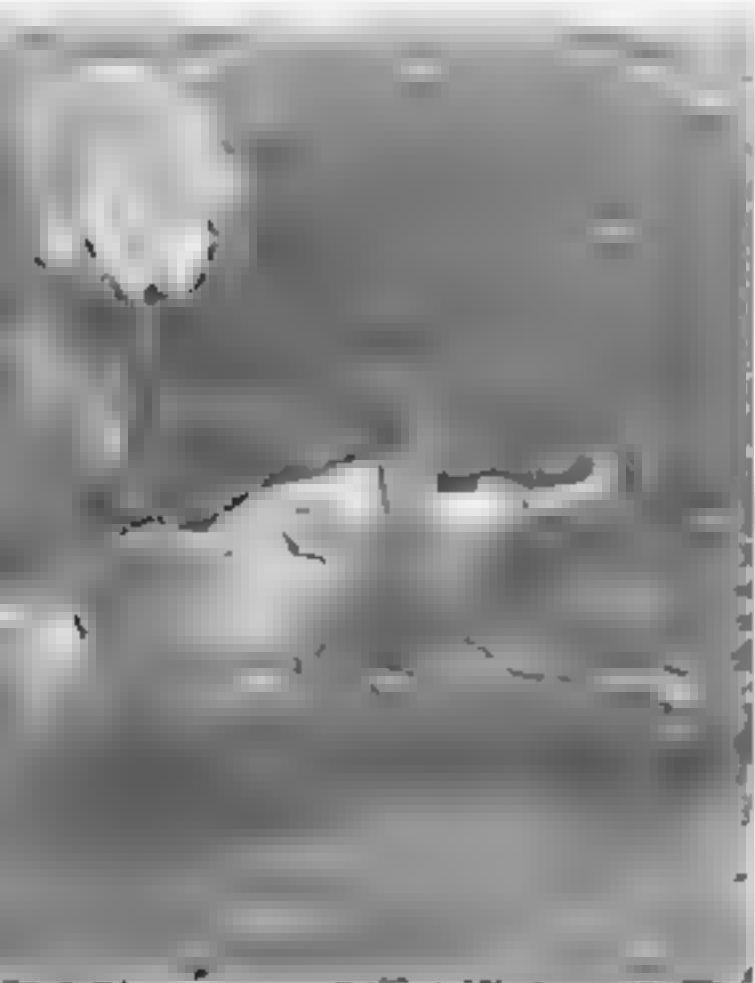
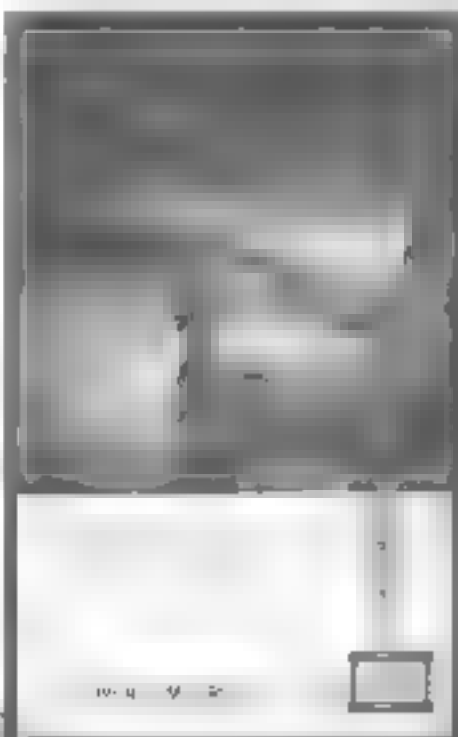
In a darkened morgue, an unidentified man cuts an arm from a corpse. The next morning, TV scriptwriter Jeff Ashup (David Cannon) receives the arm in a brown paper package addressed to him. Could it perhaps have something to do with the rape five years ago, when Jeff and his friends - Ray Sanders (John Crawford), a doctor, Bill Haug (Vince Martignetti), a building contractor, Mark Richards (Paul Carr), a cop, Ted Rogers (Ray Danner), an architect, and Mad Man Ferman (Murvin Kaplan), a radio DJ - were trapped behind a rock fall during a caving expedition? Desperately hungry after more than two weeks without food, they resorted to cannibalism, severing Ted's arm to feed themselves. A thickly for Ted, just as they crossed this morbid Rubicon, a rescue team arrived. Jeff persuaded the group to lie to the authorities, claiming that Ted's arm was crushed in the rock fall. Now someone is stalking and mutilating the remaining five.

The Severed Arm is a missed opportunity, as there's enough in the story to have made a great little horror flick. The cast give the tense, despairing cave scenes a fair shot - especially Kaplan. Ferman is quip when cannibalism is first suggested: "He'll have to hold on until tomorrow. I can't eat men on Friday's," and although the budget doesn't stretch to any make-up miracles, at least the production tries, with crusty face appliances for the starving men that resemble the early stages of zombiehood (not to mention some heroic bushy heads). The fact that the victims-in-waiting are older men rather than teen-agers is a little disappointing, but it's not a deal-breaker. The film does have the occasional scene of the men never taking time out for superfluous romance or sub-plot. Gradually, though, the film turns from horror into mope of a straightforward murder-thriller. Alderman allows the pace to slacken and there are just too many talky scenes, although some of them work dramatically, the film lacks urgency. Perhaps with a more daring shooting style *The Severed Arm* might have been a shock-in for cult reappraisal, but it's hampered by plotting.



The transvestite - as seen in the film
A Scream in the Streets

UK video sleeve for *The Severed Arm*, one of two covers that refer to *The Severed Arm*



camerawork and functional TV-style editing – unlike *Scream Bloody Murder*, a much more lurid bit-cut-off wile from the same writer (see the interview with Muri Ray elsewhere in this book). At least Phyllis Bishop's electronic score is fun, an analogue synth track a delight that sounds at times like early Tangerine Dream gate-crashing a 1970s-era *Doctor Who* story, thus keeping the mood, if not the pace, afloat. (Bishop provided similar pleasures for William Huvel's excellent *Mission of Evil* and Chris Munger's *Kiss of the Taramulak*). And the final twist is true and effective, bringing the story full circle with a claustrophobic shudder.

I've been unable to see an uncut print of this movie, which is a shame because it is clear that scenes have been trimmed, in particular the severing of Ted's arm in the cave, where both music and picture jump abruptly. To be fair, demands for extreme gore are probably misplaced anyway: this is the sort of borderline horror/drama we were more used to seeing in the seventies, before *Friday the 13th* and *Dawn of the Dead* upped the stakes, and it is unlikely that an uncut version would add more than a few blood spurts. Still, for a film about men having their arms chopped off to lose the very image the title declares is a bit of a handicap.

Director Thomas Anderson made one earlier film, *Co-Ea Dornu* (1971), which I've been unable to screen but which, according to producer Gary Adelman, was originally blessed with the title *Foruk* (as in University). It stars *The Severed Arm's* unfortunate 'Ted Rogers' aka Ray Dennis, as 'Dr. Maurice de Sade' and features softcore actress Uschi Digard in the role of 'Miss Melons' – so I think we can guess where that's heading. *The Severed Arm* was shot by Robert Maxwell, whose numerous credits in the horror genre include *The Astro-Zombies*, *The Centerfold Girls*, *Blood Mania*, *The Psycho Lover* and *Hush* (a *Terror* as well as the cult blasphemous film *Sweet Sweetback's Bloodsong*). Fans of TV's *Top Cat* may recognise 'Mad Man Herman' aka Marvin Kaplan, as the voice of Top Cat's sidekick, 'Lionel Choo'.

Made in unknown

SEX WISH

Tim McCoy (1976)

aka *Love Wish*

aka *Night Walker*

Sex Wish was more of a psychological study than a sex film. It raised a notch the level between sex and violence to an absurd point. If you separate sex from love, there is nothing but violence. Nothing but a power trip." – Zebedy Colt (thelord.com)

his New York sex-and-horror hybrid is so sleazy you can decide whether to laugh or reach for the carbolic. Sex Wish upstages even Italian shockers like Joe D'Amato's *Emanuelle in America*, making you feel like a scumbag as you enjoy the gleeful obscenity. It charts the invasion of heterosexual bliss by a snive ling sicko, whose infantile games of humiliation are motivated by raging homosexual jealousy. That this formula should produce anything other than a hateful homophobic exercise is testimony to the extraordinary commitment and energy of its bisexual star player, Mr Zebedy Colt.

Colt (real name Edward Earle Marsh, died in July 2014) had left a body of work in the field of American porno that stands as some of the most ferociously extreme of the seventies. As a performer he was a law unto himself, and his phenomenal self-assertion is nowhere better vindicated than here. Sex Wish is for Colt what *Taxi Driver* was to De Niro, what *Blue Velvet* was to Dennis Hopper, or *The Last House on the Left* to David Hess. The fact that this is a full-on porno film with penetration and cum-shots adds a verisimilitude that Scorsese and Lynch can allude to but never show.

Sex Wish begins with an outstandingly sleazy title theme, played on a fuzzed-up hearbox and organ. A girly evocation of human trash crawling through the gutters of the mind, it sounds so twisted you feel laughter bubbling up, a disconcerting sensation that recurs throughout. Beneath the credits we see a shadowy figure 'The Night Walker' Zebedy Colt, flitting through the New York streets, the Taxi

Driver milieu of whores, junkies, buggers. The credits sequence alone is unsettling enough. What follows is Grade-A New York nastiness.

Marital bliss provides the initial anchor. Cue Harry Reems as Ken, sporting a luxurious moustache and playing a nice guy this time (as opposed to his possessed turn in Shaun Costello's *Force of Entry*). As so often, he is a screen natural, easy-going and likeable. His one deliveries could easily pass muster in regular films. After bath-time frolic with his lovely wife Faye (C.J. Lange) he heads off to work, leaving her home alone – until 'The Night Walker' knocks at the door, forces his way in, and sends Sex Wish into overdrive.

Acting with the energy of the truly uninhibited and displaying conviction that suggests powerful reservoirs of inner-direction, Colt turns the first sex attack into a queasy-hilarious polymorphous playground, a grimy plunge into depravity only rarely seen in the acting profession (Colt could hold his head up high in the company of Bad Lieutenant Harvey Keitel). He counts, bullies and cajoles his victim into grotesque sexual role-play, murmuring and squealing like a baby, woe-wonder what on Earth actress C.J. Lange thought she'd stumbled into. Maybe Colt was adept at putting the client at their ease before a take, but once the cameras are rolling there's no turning back. The scene is a horrendous rape-murder played for blackest comedy. How else are we to react, during sequel as the one where Colt takes on the persona of a little boy, rapin a woman with a vibrator, before switching personalities and adopting the tones of a haughty English madam, flouncing his shoulder-length hair, and whipping the victim for 'teaching my boy a trick?' Teetering between sick and ridiculous, Colt's detailed verbalisation is a wonderful display of acting *coyness*, giving Wish the actual odour of undiluted rape-fantasy.

Things simmer down for a while after this prolonged scene, when Reems reacts to the rape and murder of his gay friend by going to a bar and accepting the offer of tróicism from a chunky Bermudian (Deanna Benfante) and also Tony Rome (forgiven for thinking the film has resolutely turned its back on plausibility). Not so – those in the throes of grief often turn themselves into sex as an escape from unbearable loss. Minus since Sex Wish has introduced us to Zebedy Colt's victim, it's difficult to see the subsequent vanilla sex scenes in quite the same way. (It's like his twisted revenge on heterosexual porn.)

What appears vanilla though is soon subverted again in an unexpected way. At the climax of his three-way with the chunky Reems announces he is going to cum. Deanna Benfante declines to receive the customary facial sacrament, but Betty is shooting over her, she gazes intently up at him and says: "I know what I'd do if I were you? I'd kill that motherfucker. I'd go out there and I'd search and I'd find him and I'd get me a gun. I'd kill that motherfucker so he could never do anything like this again." At the very moment of orgasm, this impassioned statement sends the fury of the film into overdrive, as the woman uses Reems's sexual energy to fuel his revenge (exactly the principle underlies the occult practice of sex-magic).

Colt prepares for his own climax by transferring arny's nuzzle to a nasal dropper, threading his genitalia through a cock-ring and supping into a nice white jockstrap before invading the Betty and Bobby (Candy and Ronnie Love), a young black couple, and forcing them at gunpoint to have sex in front of him. The dynamics of this scene are fascinating, because they seem to work up the relationship between a porno-director and his cast. (His sniggering demands are like the funhouse looting – he sicks wretched, wordiest porno puns upon imaginable. By showing a young black couple manipulated by the white psychopath, the film is further illicit charge to the exploitation game. It's fascinating to see the couple almost slipping out of character as Colt taunts and dares and giggles his demands – not only are they facing the challenge of acting in a porn film, they're also dealing with a fantasy so culturally perverse that it's about to break the fourth wall. When young man leaves off from a clench with his lover to say: "Look, you know that?" there's a real depth to his remark. He's girlfriend visibly tries to suppress her laughter when Colt lets loose a torrent of grotesque giggles. Colt insists she take off her pants

Take protests: "I don't want to do that." Like a psychotic film-crazy shades of *The Last House on Dead End Street*, he yells beats off-camera: "Take them off!" The couple start to fuck, and we look back to Colt watching in rapt enjoyment. "Is that what you want to see, you dirty motherfucker?" the actress demands, as we're given a close-up of the man's cock pounding her pussy. Not only is Colt the director's salient surrogate, he's ours too.

The fourth wall slips again when Colt is heard encouraging the love scene with the words "That's nice. Go on, you." Suddenly Colt, onscreen, breaks off and jabs his rubber-gloved thumb in his mouth – has he given away the actor's real name? This feeling of the artifice slipping away gives the film an edge that makes the violence even more alarming. "You clamp down on that goddamned nut and you bite it off!" he yells, sending a chill up the viewer's spine. For a second you believe him, although it's the extremity of his delivery that makes you flinch, more than the image onscreen.

As must have suited the bisexual Colt, humiliation is shared equally between the male and female victims. The man is slashed by The Night Walker's sword, and during the ensuing struggle the actress loses her wig (another shockingly weird moment). He cuts her throat but, as with Jess Franco's sex-horror pictures, we see little actual gore. In fact this is the closest the American cinema gets to a Franco film, and the similarities are very pronounced: right down to the creepy organ music. The scene draws to a close with The Night Walker castrating the dead Bobby, snarling, "It's all your fault before breaking down and crying.

The pacing is way off in the last fifteen minutes. Police procedural material intervenes where another killing would have fitted neatly. Ken almost catches the killer in the street but Colt escapes to harass a passing shopper, dragging her into a side alley as bold as you please for a bit of pre-a-pornie rape-fun. The initially unconvincing actress (Terry Hall, star of Colt's *Terry's Revenge* and McCoy's *The Erotic Dr. Jekyll*) is frogmarched into a good performance by Colt's intensity. She begins in a tacky, self-consciously 'arty' mode but by the time Colt has her tied to a ladder, her performance is a lot less 'cute'. But it's a hurried scene, compared to the others. The verbal aggression is muted, and although in any other film it would qualify as a disturbing rape scene, it's all a bit truncated by *Sex Wish* standards. Maybe the coke ran out... (For the record, Colt denied using drugs.

In a plot twist that signals merely the desire to wrap things up, Reems attends a gay nightclub on a hunch and recognises Colt performing onstage as a sort of foppish cross-gender entertainer. Leaping to his feet, he points at the outrageously attired killer, and utters the immortal line: "That's him. That's her. The murderer. The raped." Colt shoots dead a policeman played by Robert Kernan (thus doing what harder-of-hearing movie cannibals could not) and flees, before being cornered by Reems in a part of the club that resembles the Kotova Milk Bar. "I did it because I love you," he cries. Reems shoots him, but the end credits speculate as to whether we've really seen the end of The Night Walker. Sequel, anyone?

So who made *Sex Wish*? Well, the film was originally called *Night-Walker* (the version I've seen has a title card inserted during the credits, bearing the words *Sex Wish* in a different font), with the director listed onscreen as Tim McCoy. However, Zebedy Colt told at least one interviewer that he directed as well as starred. "Colt regards his best films as those that he directed – *The Affair of Justice*, *Playgirls in Munich*, *Sex Wish*" – see www.lukeford.com. A third character, Milton Vickers, has been associated with the director's chair on this movie too: his name is on the American Copyright Catalogue entry) – amazing, since it's the sort of super-sleazy film where you'd expect people to be denying involvement rather than claiming it! Given that Colt essentially governs the course of each scene he plays (especially the one with the black couple, in which he literally sits beside them and directs their sex scene), it's possible that he was responsible for directing his own scenes while McCoy or Vickers (could they be one and the same?) directed the rest of the movie.

Gay viewers of political sensitivity may find the film homophobic. Despite its bisexual provenance, it is, after all, about a

jealous homosexual who murders any woman who gets close to the heterosexual male he desires: at the end of the film the heavily made-up Night Walker declares that he murdered out of love for Ken, and Ken shoots him dead. For a gay viewer not to be offended by the film, they must be able to enjoy the extraordinary performance Colt contributes, without this enjoyment, *Sex Wish* will probably appear as gay-friendly an experience as William Friedkin's *Cruising*.

It's as well to reflect on your opinions before dismissing Zebedy Colt as music critic Rob Amsel discovered in 1969 when he reviewed Colt's man-to-man love song album, "I'll Sing for You." Amsel wrote: "Don't be suckered into buying these old standards just because they're sung by a guy. The orchestrations and male choruses were enough to turn me onto Lawrence Welk, who does that sort of bubble music so much better. Zebedy (where did he ever get that name) may be a nice guy, but his taste stems from Early Tacky to Late Forest Hills, and his music (mucous?) album typifies everything that was wrong with the Eisenhower years."

A bad review can set anyone's temples throbbing, but the temptation to respond is usually a mistake. That said, few of us have Zebedy Colt's seething resentment, nor his way with words, as his letter to the publication in question shows: "Who in the fuck is Bob Amsel? Out of what pile of shit did he emerge to decide what is good or bad? His review of my album is so stupidly biased and ignorant of the kind of war I'm waging that his opinions made me want to vomit all over him. If Amsel wishes to debate publicly, privately or in print, I'm ready to cut his balls off with a rusty razor blade any time." (Thanks to the late Jack Nichols for these quotes, which can be found online at the City Today Entertainment Archives.)

So to reiterate: *Sex Wish* is a stunning *jeu-de-force* that pushes the envelope while everyone else is still looking for a flat surface to write the letter. I'm not a superstitious man, but I don't want the ghost of Zebedy Colt jumping out at me with a rusty razorblade. Now, perhaps I should go back and rewrite those Al Adamson pieces.

Made in New York City.

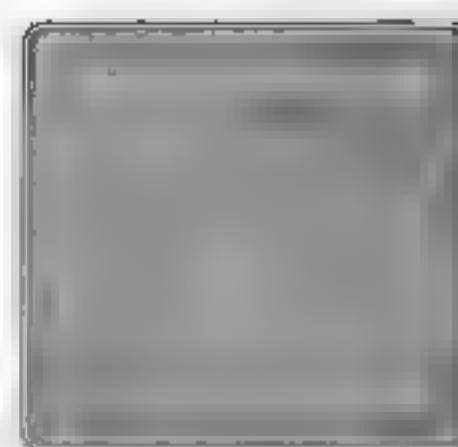
SHADOWS OF THE MIND

Roger Watkins (erroneously credited to Bernard Travis' c. 1980), aka *A Heritage of Blood*

After her release from a mental institution, Elise Sayers (Marion Joyce) returns to the house where she was brought up, and where, as a child, she saw her father (Richard McNichol) and stepmother (Marcia Watkins) drown. Soon, her unsympathetic stepbrother Leland (G.E. Barrymore), arrives, and the gardener is murdered by an unseen assailant. The following night, Elise's attentive psychiatrist Doctor Lang (Erik Rolfe) and his fiancée Diana Russell (Bianca Sloan) drop by for a social evening, but jealousy and unresolved tensions between the four lead to further murders.

Talk about contrasts. This film from the director of *The Last House on Dead End Street* could not be further removed from the demented or that first extraordinary movie. In an interview with David Kerekes (see the booklet for the DVD release of *The Last House on Dead End Street*), Watkins says that he directed *Shadows of the Mind*, having written it with his friend Paul Jensen, under the title *A Heritage of Blood* (inspired by David Pirie's pioneering film book *A Heritage of Horror*). According to Watkins, one Bernard Travis then improperly claimed the director's credit (Travis had already named Watkins's title by imposing a cop-out voice-over on the ending of *The Last House on Dead End Street*). Watkins further alleges that producer Leo Fenton's wife Marion Joyce (star of *Shadows of the Mind*) stole the writer's credit.

It's hard to see what Watkins would gain by lying about this: *The Last House on Dead End Street* is a masterpiece, *Shadows of the Mind* is just awful. It's tedious and poorly conceived on just about every level. Watkins agrees, claiming that he once demanded of his producer: "Leo, why are we making this fucking film? It stinks!" Fenton, referring to the fact that he was making the movie as a sop to his wife Marion, who thirsted for a career as an actress, replied:

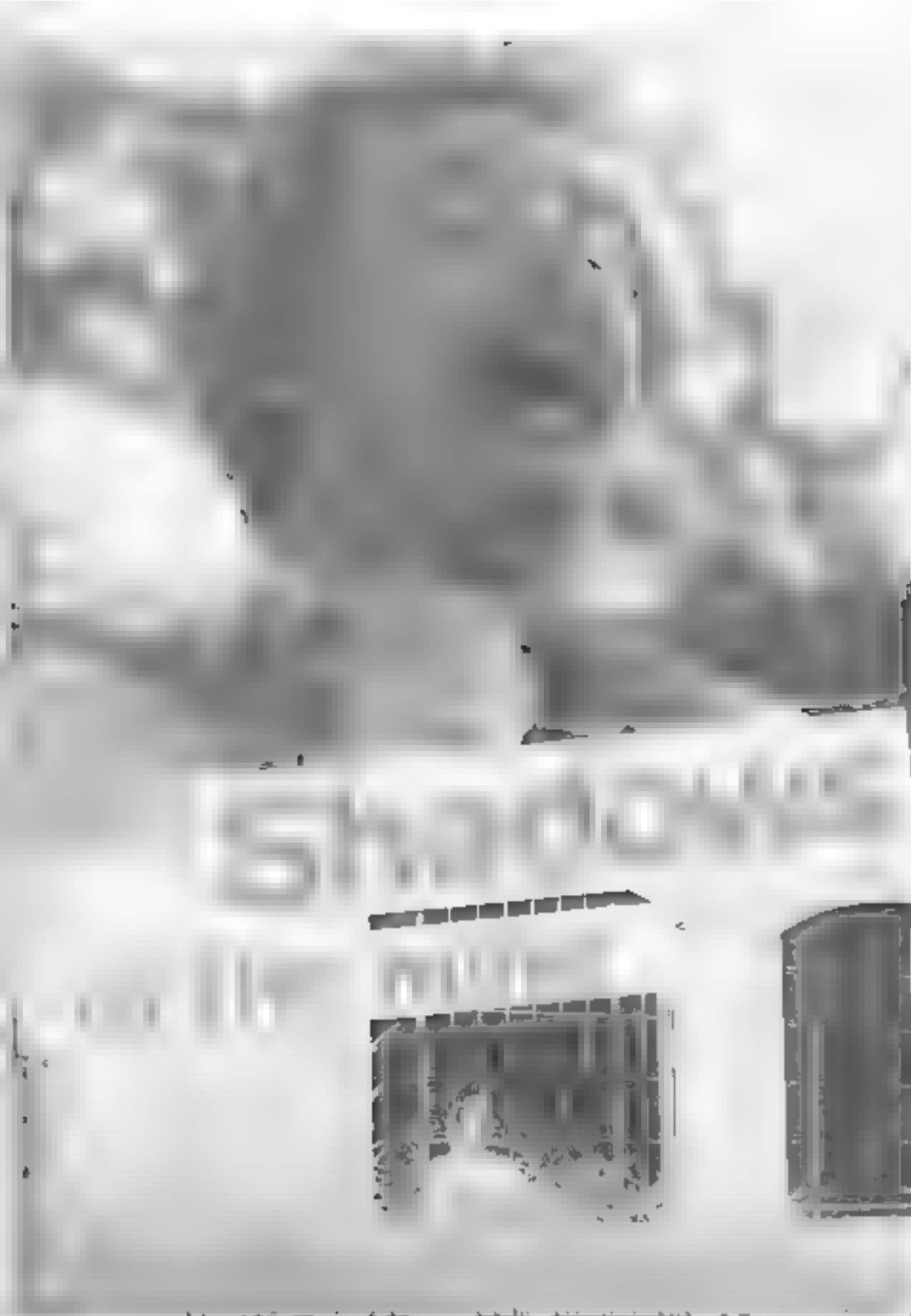


opposite page from *Sex Wish* Series for *Sex Wish* Zebedy Colt as the Night Walker, breaking

tying up the female occupant. C.J. and subjecting her to physical rape, as well as his become targets.

and cutting her throat. Later he attacks a black couple, Candy Love Snow and Carl, and insists that they make love to his orders as he sits watching and. He is finally brought to book by the husband of his first victim, played by John Legend.





Shadows of the Mind
 (left) poster for The

... poster for The

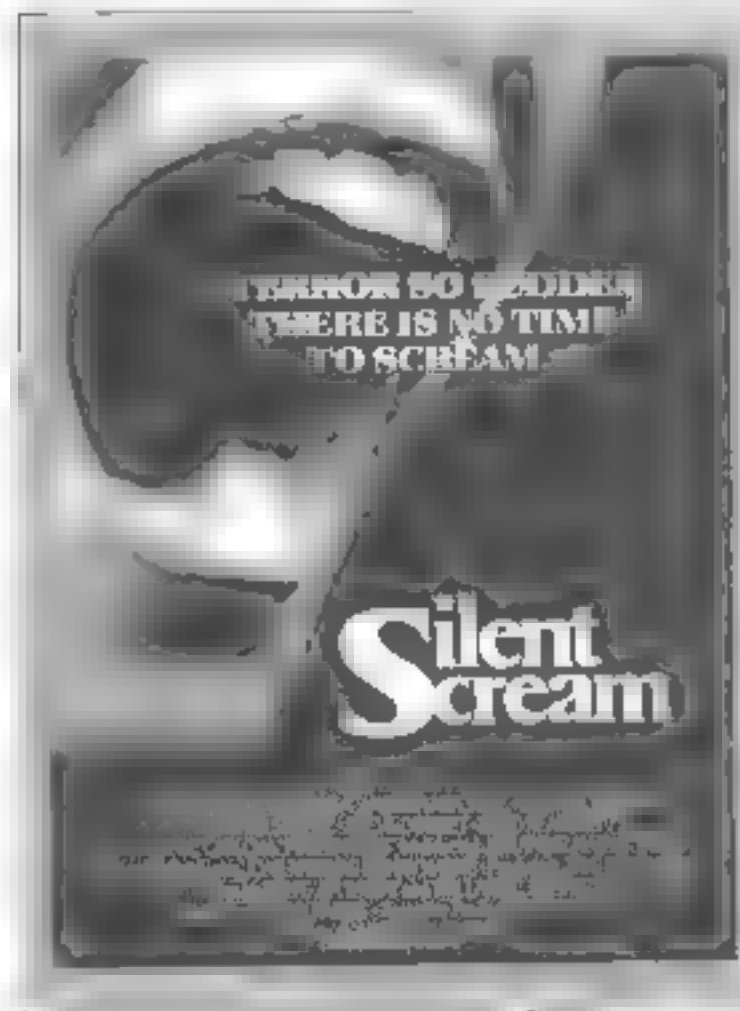
is cheaper than a divorce!" Well, perhaps a divorce would have been better overall. Marion Joyce is far too frumpy and unappealing to carry the movie. Leland, her mean, money-grubbing stepbrother, is at least convincing in his evil. The plot is so slow that eavesdroppers would have time to plan, commit and conceal a murder of their own between each new development. The only discernible link to Watkins's first film is the relentless unlikability of the characters. Leland is a mouse-bore stink obsession with jealousy over her father's love for her stepmother. Leland is a selfish pig looking us captaincy on the sale of the house, and Diana (Leland) who enjoys stirring up trouble simply because of a vague sense of jealousy at her fiancée's concern for his patient. Even Andrew the dancer (Anthony Frank) is an idiot. I usually warm to the kind of movies where people get garden coats through the necks, but *Shadows of the Mind* fails to enliven its dopey story with enough such gruesomeness, and it certainly never feels remotely as dangerous or frightening as *The Last House on Dead End Street* (also *The Last House on Dead End Street*).

SILENT NIGHT BLOODY NIGHT

Theodore Gershinny (1933)
 silent *Death House*
 aka *Death House*
 aka *Night of the Dark Full Moon*
 aka *Zora*

1933: Wilfred Butler, the owner of a grand old house used as an asylum, dies in mysterious circumstances. The building is empty for thirty-five years until the heir puts it on the market. This creates consternation among the town's dignitaries (including Mayor Adams, Walter Abel), Charles Towns (the proprietor of the local newspaper (John Carradine), Sheriff Mason (Walter Klayton), and—in a quirk that's maybe the only laugh in the film—the switchboard operator, Tess (Howard Frank Stevens). Butler's lawyer John Carter (Patrick O'Neal) arrives town and discovers that the town dignitaries are very keen to snap up the property themselves. That night, the lawyer and his flunky, Ingrid (Astrid Heeren), are murdered at the house by an unseen figure. The dignitaries receive a phone call from a woman called Marianne, drawing them one by one up to the house, and their doom. Jeffrey Butler arrives and strikes up a relationship with the mayor's daughter Diane Adams (Mary Wootton). Together they try to solve the mystery of what really happened back in 1933.

You know one of the great pleasures of watching a silent film is that you can't help but notice what's wrong with this film, as we slip from antic into scepticism, and finally to dismissiveness. I expected to this, having seen stills of ominous robed figures roaming the grounds of a spooky old house, reproduced in many a film magazine. But *Silent Night Bloody Night* is a painful affair, wheeled my appetite would it be as much fun as *Silent Night Bloody Night*? Or *Christopher Ford*? High hopes indeed, but soon dashed. *Silent Night Bloody Night* is a painfully slow affair, plotted for maximum irritation, with a delicate structure that will fall apart in the first hour. Gershinny shows some visual style, as seen in the shots here and there, but he directs in painstaking monotony, watching over events he can't properly dramatise. The dialogue is a tiresome voice-over, and the post-synch recording is poor.





an American film, some scenes are more akin to a stodgily dubbed Italian drama of the 1950s. The snow-dappled exteriors and leafless trees during the first half of the film exude a wintry atmosphere similar to David Cronenberg's *The Brood*, and the glowering string arrangements sometimes recall Howard Shore's work on that film, but the sun carries really do stop there. The latter half of the film is shot almost entirely at night, with scene after scene played in near-blackness. The screen flaps from darkened roadside to darkened interior, with barely a flicker of imagination about how to animate such a rapist's palette. Of course, a film of relentless shadow is ill-suited to videotape, so it's possible that a decent DVD release would have revealed more detail and style. But the film has trouble even getting started, wasting everyone's time with halting heart in the company of Butler's lawyer (an awful, leaden performance by Patrick O'Neil). When he and his girlfriend are dispatched by an axe-wielding mystery attacker, one's spirit is briefly poked, sadly. Gershuny lets the film slip back into lethargy. At least Mary Woronov suggests an intelligence beyond the reach of the story, but she's wasted in a role that barely uses her abilities.

The asylum flashbacks mark an at first exciting shift into gaudy, overexposed seppia, but even this becomes irritating. The appearance here by members of New York's underground film scene is another baited hook the film waves before us, but by the time you get to see Candy Darling, Ondine Jack Smith and other MacLise cavorting and grinning as asylum inmates, you're almost ready to swap the experience for a screening of Warhol's *W*.

The film was shot at Oyster Bay, Long Island. Gershuny wrote about filmmaking in an essay called *The Grand Voyage* for the book *Swan to Be a Major Motion Picture: Silent Night, Blood Night* was eventually picked up in 1981 for a very brief spell in British theatres, playing under the inelegant retailing *Devotions: Made in New York State*.

THE SILENT SCREAM

Jenny Jarmack 19

Another nice young college girl forced to take off-campus accommodation, another old house with mysterious goings on in the attic, another strange old lady, another nervy young man whose mental stability is in question. Can *The Silent Scream* distinguish itself from the crowd? The answer is yes, but only just. The actors take a fair slice of the credit. Rebecca Bunting especially is sweet and plausible as Scotty, the teenage teen, and Juli Andelman gives chilly, cheerful Jewish girl Jory a light touch to contrast with her heavy hand. The great-looking house is a bonus too, and when Barbara Steele pops up in the latter stages, bored fans of an certain age will levitate in their seats. There's also a tense, well-edited slinking, a tasty murder on a lonely stretch of beach, and a pleasantly Gothic climax. So what's the problem?

From its slow and prologue and lavish, tagrantly Hermetian scene to its attractive setting and elegant old-fashioned camerawork, *The Silent Scream* adds a *souper* of class to its serving of genre cliché. And 'class' isn't always a good thing in horror. Depending on your tolerance, it is either a cut above the nasty old slashers, or a touch too stuffy and tweedy for its own good. Personally, I find warmth to this one despite its unwillingness to go for the regular. The characterisations are uncomplicated but they're well sketched and likeably played. Creepy Mason (Bran Rearden) comes from a long line of voyeuristic post-*Pсихо* nerds but we greet him with pleasurable recognition. After all, who would dream of renting out student digs *without* motor grills in all the rooms, linked by hidden corridors just perfect for peeping?

So it's the same old story we've seen so many times before, but it's fun anyway. Peter (John Wauchock), a rich, sexist drunk makes an ideal first victim, and it only remains for me to say we should perhaps have had a little more of the red stuff when he dies (I'm sure we said that a hundred times in this book already, but

THE SILENT SCREAM

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Silent Scream is a B-stream slasher with a *cinematic* streak, massaging in many ways but decorating the standard format with gaudy parallels to classic cinema. A victim meets her death in the cellar, cut to ribbons in a scene that replays *Psycho*'s shower murder amidst hanging sheets, culminating in a direct reference to the shot where Janet Leigh grips the shower curtain as she falls. There's even a swinging light shade. And this after Mel Brooks's *High Anxiety* (1977) placed Hitchcock pastiche beyond the pale for the most shameless (which is the category Brian De Palma occupies). On a more obscure note, a great visual trick – involving a portrait in place of a mirror – serves perfectly to cue the initial image of guest star Barbara Steele. It's like a scene from the classical Italian horror films in which Steele made her name, such as *The Mask of Satan* (1960) or *The Long Hair of Satan* (1965).

The Silent Scream was the Wheat Brothers' first produced script. Having made their own short film called *Stuck on the Screen*, they decided to put together a low-budget feature, to be called *Birthright*. They wrote a story, raised development money, and used it to hire a professional screenwriter. Unfortunately, with an investor, director, cast and crew in place, a change in the laws killed the financing. To make matters worse, the screenwriter turned in a lousy script. Back at square one again, the two wrote another screenplay which was noticed by Denny Harris, then chiefly a commercials director. He declined the script but hired the Wheat to rewrite and produce *The Silent Scream* (The script Harris declined became *The Return* by Crevdon Clark, starring Cybill Shepherd, Jon-Michael Vincent, Neville Brand and Raymond Burr.) Three quarters of *The Silent Scream* had already been shot, and the Wheat Brothers were hired to write and produce twenty minutes worth of material to glue it together. Ken Wheat asserted in *Fangoria* that, "in the end, we eliminated all but twelve minutes of the original footage, and for the same money that was going to be spent on a few bus and pieces, we put together an essentially new film. All but four parts were cut or recast, and we hired Yvonne De Carlo, Cameron Mitchell and Barbara Steele to do a couple of days each. It was guerrilla film making, with twelve days of principal photography, then several months of no-budget inserts and doubled shots." If anyone takes a chance reissuing *The Silent Scream* on DVD one day, it would be fascinating to see the abandoned material, along with the finished version. Sadly, for all its charms, doubt whether it will receive such deluxe treatment. Denny Harris disappeared again after this and seems not to have directed anything else. The Wheat went on to write *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* and *The Fly II*, before scoring a hit with the story and screenplay for David Twohy's *Pitch Black* (2000).

Made in California



SIMON, KING OF THE WITCHES

Bruce Kessler (1971)
Simon, King of the Witches is an intelligent, warm and witty addition to the early seventies witchcraft subgenre, starring the ever-wonderful Andrew Pine. It's unmainly left-field in its sympathetic evocation of the life and beliefs of a magickian, refreshingly for the subgenre. Simon's actions are geared not towards material gain or the furtherance of petty squabbles with other magickians, his aim is simple and much lighter: he wishes to achieve equality with the gods – note the plural, the theme is not Satanism, and there's no dilly-dallying with the trappings of inverted Christianity. He seeks to move among the higher beings as an equal, and he uses his powers in furtherance of this aim. But because he has not yet ascended, he can be thwarted or thrown off-course, and he's capable of error, making choices which rebound in ways he hasn't been able to anticipate. Even a skilled practitioner can be blind-sided by the immense forces at play in the wider realm of magick. Simon's entire project is destabilized by a single mistake: when a rich sceptic (Angus Duncan) deliberately pays for a Tarot reading with a rubber cheque, "And I want you to know it was worth every penny of that!", Simon curses him, and two days later the man is dead. This disproportionate response may be the seed of Simon's eventual failure to achieve his loftier goal. Likewise, he fails to regard the complexities of his actions closely enough, remarking at one point that he is not simply cursing the District Attorney but the entire Establishment. The fact that this spell works too well, not only wiping corrupt officials but also screwing the city's drug dealers, whose names are found in the Police Chief's wife, shows just how out of control things can get.

The film's recurrent symbol for elemental power is rain, when we first meet Simon, he is living in a Los Angeles storm drain ("When it rains, most people go in, I go out," he declares to camera in the film's opening seconds.) Rain falls in torrents during several key scenes, including the extended climax in which Simon's curse on the District Attorney (Norman Burton) leads to a chain reaction of arrests of corrupt public figures. The rain is also a dominant force during Simon's final confrontation with the gods, who resist his Promethean efforts to join them by possessing an unwilling vessel (a drug dealer) who attacks him. This has been foreshadowed earlier: Simon asked Linda (Brenda Scott) not to take drugs while his most ambitious magickal working takes place, because the forces ranged against him can use the mind of a drug user, guiding them to do a bidding beyond their control. (This provides an explanation, if you're so inclined, of why so many inexplicable, impossible, sometimes terrifying things seem to happen when you're high.) The film's liberated view of drug-taking and drug-dealing (neither of which is "denormalized") therefore runs alongside an awareness that for true mastery of the elemental realm, intoxicants must be set aside. Of course in the late sixties and early seventies, drug-taking and black magick were frequently intertwined in the clichés of the era, so it's refreshing to see a film in which the distinction between druggy hedonism and the asceticism of the Magus is made without rancour.

In the area of sexuality, *Simon, King of the Witches* is again surprising and sophisticated. Thrown in a jail cell one rainy night for vagrancy, Simon befriends a teenage boy called Turk (George Parisini), who says, with a smile, that he was arrested for "loitering. I was just sitting on a kerb." It's clear that Turk is a hustler, and although the film hedges its bets, making him a heterosexual by choice and a homosexual by profession, it's still a plausible and sensitively handled characterisation. The link between Simon and Turk is the predominant human relationship of the film, and although both characters engage in sex with women, the underlying dynamic is of a Platonic bond between teacher and acolyte – that is, homosexual – in Greek manner. For Simon, however, Turk is more a friend and confidante than a serious student of magick. Simon is already preparing to go beyond the mortal realm; he doesn't have time to begin nurturing



opposite page: Rebecca Ewing, as the intrepid Scotty, gets more than she bargained for after exploiting the big, old house she's staying at, in *The Silent Scream*.

inset: The UK video cover from Hammer.

this page: bottom left: Horror icon Barbara Steele in *The Silent Scream*.

below: Ultra violet as a back mask, whose methods are deadly.



3. A. M. S. S.



Simon, King of the Jews: I can speak but like
the dumb; my heart is full.
The noblest of our fellows
Have put their hands to his detraction,
And have pronounced him mad as he who speaks
The inflexible truth;
I am no prophet, and know nothing;



Bruce Kessler never did work in the cinema again after this misadventure, going on to a very busy career in television, filming everything from *Chill Factor* to *Angel Ruler*, *T.J. Hooker* to *Mr. & Mrs. Simon* was not the first time he'd handled gay subject matter, his comedy *The Gay Executives* (1969), about two straight men who pretend to be gay in order to escape the draft to Vietnam, is a good opinion, with some enjoying it as a witty come-capsule of the era, and prising it for its daring, and others complaining that it perpetuated stereotypes. Writer Robert Pappenny also wrote the screenplay of the Marion Brando movie *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968). According to Prince, in an interview with *Killer's Krypt* (www.killerskrypt.com), "[Pappenny] was a real warlock. He was damn serious about being a freak. He had a coven of witches. The movie that he wrote was based upon a part of his life. He was making money at Hollywood parties, doing what he called 'fakery'. And that supported his real life. He'd conjure up 'witching' powers. This guy was not kidding. He was a fascinating character. So we attempted to do him justice."

Made in California

SISTERS OF DEATH

Joseph Mazzuca (1972, released 1977)
aka *Death Trap*

Five young women receive an invitation to a reunion party for the sororhood they formed at college. But who's pulling the strings behind the scenes? Seven years ago, one member of the group was killed during a sorority game of Russian Roulette, so when the dead girl's father pops up the answer seems obvious, but a quick resolution is deferred by the revelation that one of the girls deliberately placed a live round in the gun. An electrified fence prevents anyone from leaving and cues up some dreadfully acted despair and panic. For the next sixty minutes the girls are menaced by a variety of horrors, from a ho-hum hairy spider to the inevitable ratlesnake and a less than impressive Avian attack. After that, if you care to track all the subsequent twists you're more diligent than

A ninety-minute mis-mash of ideas between TV-movie trash and B-movie stuff, with no slash, *Sisters of Death* is typical of what happens when boring *mise en scene* and a lack of gratuitous violence get in the way. The basic plot suggests a slasher movie along the lines of *Scream House* *Murderer*, what you actually get is the sort of thing you might once have flicked past on afternoon television. The trouble with this film is not that it misuses plot convolutions for good writing; it's the drab, workaday *Charlie's Angels* vibe that pervades at all levels. *Sisters of Death* offers no real horror, and not a scrap of style or imagination. The girls' reactions to their predicament are pitiful, and occasionally laughable; one, who's become a Buddhist since leaving college, copes with the discovery that they're all trapped by squatting down and chanting her mantra. Some films pull through despite their TV ambience: *All the Quiet Strangers* for instance, or *The Touch of Satan*. *Sisters of Death*, though, is just the pits.

Oddly, the soundtrack features several moody compositions featured prominently in Jess Franco's *Henry in Furs*, a film that could teach Mr. Mazzuca a thing or two about turning clichés into movie gold. The score for Franco's film is credited to Mike Hugg with American pop-rockers Manfred Mann, although biographies on Mann fail to mention it. If the pieces used in *Sisters of Death* are actually library tracks, they account for a large part of *Henry in Furs*: a song only one (admittedly central and mesmerizing) composition for electric piano and organ unaccounted for. Perhaps it was this theme alone that Mann and Hugg provided? But I digress, because talking about Jess Franco is a holiday from the square-ass mundanity of this film. In the great expanse of American horror cinema, a film like this is the drive-by don't-stop Mid-West burg of the genre. It's not bad enough to amuse, not nasty enough to appeal, there's no compelling story to tell, and it's not morbid enough to burn you out. It's just dull, the cardinal sin – and that's all there is to it.

Made in California



SKETCHES OF A STRANGLER

Paul Leder (1978)

Middle-aged art student Jack Carvey (Allen Goorwitz aka 'Allen Garfield') lives with his religious freak sister Ellen (Jennifer Rhodes), who still treats him like the teenager he was when their parents died. He lets off steam by strangling prostitutes, deviating from his job occasionally to take in actresses and strippers. One of the prostitutes he strangles is Margaret Foster, whose twin sister Lynn (Meredith MacRae in both roles) arrives in town to identify her body. Shocked to learn that her twin was not a model as she'd claimed, but a whore working Hollywood Boulevard, Lynn vows to catch the killer and assume the identity of a hooker to entrap him. She's aided in this dangerous scheme by Artie (Clayton Kopp), an ex-cop now running a late night bar after being drummed out of the force on a suspected, but never proven, murder rap. Meanwhile Ellen has begun to suspect that her brother is up to no good, and by tracking him through the streets one night, she inadvertently pushes him into the arms of Lynn. Stunned, and mesmerised, he sees her as Margaret reincarnated.

Sketches of a Strangler is interesting and worth checking out, but it's a bit half-baked by Paul Leder's standards. Come are the days when his method-school training gave a post-hoc aggression to films such as John Hayes's *Five Minutes to Love* (which he wrote and starred in). More to the point, the minuscule, depressive depths of his previous horror film, *My Friends Never Kill* (1976), run rather shallower here. Although Arlon Ober's music has a predatory sweep to its orchestration, the film on the whole feels like a missed opportunity, and suffers from a lack of credibility. For a start, the stranglings are deeply unconvincing, both in the way Garfield fails to simulate real pressure, and the often ridiculous positions from which he applies it. Two years

RENT

Scratches of a

THE UNTOUCHABLES
A FILM BY JOHN DAHL

Page 4 of 5

The Slayer Joseph Caldwell

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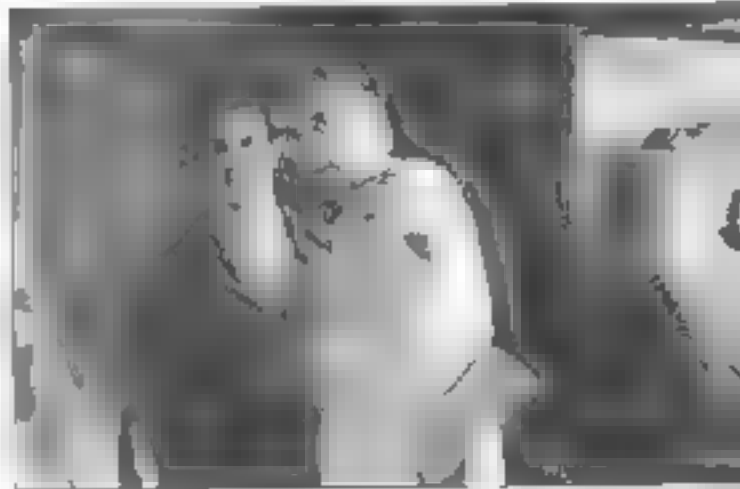
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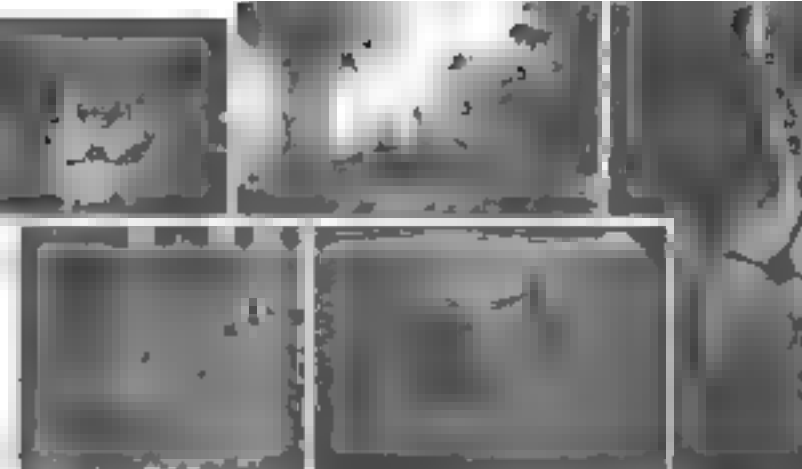
Wade n California
 December 1980 in. 11 friends' seed letters

THE SINGER

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thanks to the great location work, but eventually it drags. What's worse, when David's body is finally discovered it's hard for the characters to make the transition from happy-go-lucky to shocked and terrorized, because there's still too much time left to go and they'd hit the hysteria button too early. This means that Kay seems to take the death of her husband in her stride too easily, which further reduces her likability. If two lesser characters had gone missing, a more gradual increase in panic and tension could have been achieved. Still, for a film that involves so much wandering around in gloomy semi-darkness *The Slayer* is a class act, from its surprisingly adept symphonic score to its final out-of-the-field twist, which manages to get away with one of the most hackneyed devices in the genre. The 'Slayer' itself is seen only once but it's a marvelous creation, like something dredged from the swamper recesses of *Wendy Bates*, and although this is not a genre-athon by any stretch of imagination, the scene where one of the four gets a pitchfork rammed through their chest is as increasingly nasty as contemporary efforts like *The Boyz n the Hood* or *Friday the 13th Part 2*.

The Slayer was shot on Tybee Island, Georgia. Cardone went on to helm genre items like *Shadowzone* (1990) and, perhaps his best work post-*Slayer*, *The Forsaken* (2001). He recently turned up with a straight-to-video 'sequel' to the Nicolas Cage vehicle *Brain* called *Brain 2* (2004), although the retitling was imposed by Sony Pictures after the shoot, against Cardone's wishes. Cardone frequently worked again with cast and crew members from this, his first film, particularly Frederick Flynn and Carol Kottenbrook, the latter moving behind the camera to become his regular producer.

Made in Georgia.

SOLE SURVIVOR

Thom Eberhardt (1983)

Denise Watson (Anita Skinner), a TV producer, is the sole survivor of a plane crash. As she tries to resume her life, she notices bedraggled strangers – in the streets, in the park, in the hospital garage – staring at her with hollow, malevolent eyes. Plagued by night fears, and a series of terrifying near-miss accidents, she spins to her sweet, attentive doctor, Brian Richardson (Kurt Johnson), and her teenage neighbour Kristy (Robin Davidson). Neither is able to help. Hostile emissaries of death haunt her every move, intent on repossessing her extra lease of life.

Since its low-key release onto video in 1984, *Sole Survivor*'s somnolent pace and lack of gore have cast it into the shadows, which is a shame because it's very well made, sensitively acted, and boasts one of the creepiest 'walking dead' scenarios you could ask for. It is the sort of under-your-skin experience that'll keep you awake at night. If you see it just before bedtime. Zombie movies were enjoying a maggoty heyday in the early 1980s, and, with *The Return of the Living Dead* and *Re-Animator* just round the corner, this is one of the last to join the ranks before comedy-splatter became the new default mode for horror. The twist in *Sole Survivor* is to have permeating cadavers converging on just one person. This leads to some mighty effective shudders, as strange, pasty-faced individuals stalk the jittery heroine, gradually intensifying their efforts to finish off what the pre-credits plane crash started.

You seriously have to wonder if Glen Morgan and Jeffrey Reddick, the writers of *Final Destination* (2000) were aware of this movie: the similarities are marked enough for Eberhardt, who

wrote as well as directed, to at least check with his lawyer. Like the *Final Destination* films (which, love, by the way), suspense is brilliantly orchestrated throughout: the multi-talented Eberhardt edits the picture too, with perhaps only a few romantic interludes relaxing us too far. Structurally, there are a few lapses: for instance, a subplot involving a psychic actress (Caren Lorkey) is weakly developed, and peripheral to much of the story – but it does at least cue a great final payoff. References to the psycho-logic condition known as 'Survivor Syndrome' are more successfully deployed: rather like the heroine of *Rosemary's Baby*, Denise finds that her supernatural predicament is dismissed by others as mere mental illness, brought on in this case by sole-survivor guilt. The chilling statistic that many such individuals commit suicide within two years of their accidents, either deliberately or by carelessly stepping out into traffic, gives the film an extra frisson: one can easily imagine the American dark fantasist Dennis Etchison (whose work has been sorely neglected by filmmakers) making hay with the notion of 'careless suicides' whose fates are the handwork of supernatural agencies.

When the heroine of *Sole Survivor* goes on the run at the climax of the movie, Eberhardt takes the slightly shop-worn threat of the living dead and crafts a nightmarishly intimate variant. There's a great scene in which Denise, scared out of her wits, drives at night through the city, eventually running out of gas in a deserted shopping thoroughfare. The poor woman sits in her car, not daring to get out, knowing that *somewhere*, in a nearby morgue

Anita Skinner survives a plane crash only to be haunted by the living dead in *Sole Survivor*.

Score 5.

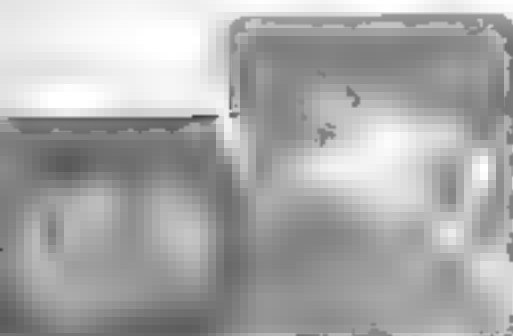




1984 VHS release

Video sleeve for Sometimes Aunt Martha Does Dreadful Things

From the same film, Stanley (Scott Lawrence) gets when a girl gets too close to him and he usually



a hospital or bed or back-alley, a corpse is coming back to life with the sole purpose of killing her. It's a marvellously paranoid notion that ought to have lifted Eberhardt alongside hotshots of the era like John Carpenter and Wes Craven.

But after the highly enjoyable sci-fi-horror flick *Night of the Comet* (1984), Eberhardt abandoned the scary stuff and dedicated himself to comedy and teen romance. It's a shame because he could have been a genuine new voice in the horror genre. Unfortunately for us, he appeared on the scene just as horror was collapsing as a commercial force, hamed by the upcoming eighties avalanche of sneering big-budget horror-comedy and fascistic action-violence. For one would love to see him return, now that the genre is once again attractive to producers.

Sole Survivor features Tom Lawrence, the psychotic anti-heroine of her father Marc Lawrence's *Pigs*, in a small role as an actress suffering multiple takes of a coffee commercial. And while *nothing* can compete with a cross reference to *Pigs* (one of the finest American horror films of the seventies), it's just about worth noting that *Sole Survivor*'s cinematographer Russell Carpenter went on to shoot a lucky love story set on a sinking ship, called *Twister* (1997).

Made in California.

SOME TIMES AUNT MARTHA DOES DREADEFUL THINGS

Thomas Casey (1971)
aka *Don't Spank Baby* (slanting title)

This Floridian fumble through the genre's cross-dressing camp-kuchers starts off about as much fun as a Stanley Baxter sketch, but it's worth hanging in there, if you can, for a *volte face* about three-quarters of the way through. A gay criminal, dom-dominant, possessive Paul (Abe Zwick) and his child-like hah-boy lover Stanley (Scott Lawrence, Wayne Crawford) are in the Miami suburbs after bungling a jewel robbery in Baltimore. Paul dresses as drag as Stanley's 'Aunt Martha' while Stanley—who drives a van apparently borrowed from the Sonny-Doo gang—keeps putting their cover-story at risk by getting stoned and bringing girls back to the house. There's little charm to these early scenes that you spend the first half of the movie eagerly awaiting the arrival of the authorities. Casey is so determined to make comedy capital out of transvestism that he expects us to believe no one notices that Aunt Martha is a man in a ludicrous wig, not even the various hair-hippers and hippie-chicks who converge on the area, who really ought to know a thing or two about drag since half of them look like female impersonators. Despite having chosen to depict a gay relationship of sorts (not exactly common ground for an exploitation horror film), *Sometimes Aunt Martha* spends its first hour standing aloof from its subject, essentially playing the scenario for cheap laughs. Stanley explores his confused sexuality by wriggling around half-dressed with hippie girls while Paul speculates on the situation and occasionally murders the interlopers to calm his nerves. The arch acting style of Abe Zwick probably carries favour with some, but it got on my nerves almost as much as the succession of bland Miami interiors. However, writer-director Thomas Casey turns the film around in the last reel by delving, rather more believably, into sadomasochism. It's also a relief that he takes the story out on the road, away from the horrendous interiors. You can bet that somewhere in the director's head there was a horror-comedy take on *The Killing of Sister George* with an imploding relationship between old queen and young rough trade, but it's so poorly executed you'd have to be as crazy as Paul to fall for it. At least the climax has some fizz, as Stanley delivers a baby by Caesarean section (don't ask), and he and Paul hide out in a film studio (another *Sister George* reference?) Paul finally clips his wig completely, ties Stanley up, writes 'Stan' in ink on his forehead, and swatches him with the twelve red neckties they've stolen, before leering into his face and threatening to kill him. This now, as we reach the showdown, is the character of Paul



frightening. It's too little too late for the film as a whole, but this does show what was missing from the rest of the movie—a touch of spite and some aggressive (albeit theatrical) psychological confrontation.

Various notables from the Florida film community helped in on the picture. Brad Hunter, director of *Blood Freak*, plays a cop, Harry Kerwin, director of *God's Bloody Act* and *Looking Even*, directed Zwick; while his brother William, star on numerous local productions including Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast*, was a grip. Chief among the Miami alumni of course is Wayne Crawford aka 'Scott Lawrence' who became Harry Kerwin's right-hand man, writing the scripts of *God's Bloody Act*, *Looking Even* and *Barbaricula*, co-directing the latter two with Zwick. When interviewed Crawford in 2002 had this to say about *Sometimes Aunt Martha*: "Tom Casey was a really interesting fellow, a very smart eccentric guy. He started with a schedule of three weeks and shot twelve. I met Harry Kerwin during this movie; he was a friend of Tom's and tried to get him out of his schedule troubles. *Aunt Martha* was his first and only film I think. The script was not very good and in my honest opinion kind of stupid, but it was a lesson in a movie and had never done one. I don't believe a dozen people ever saw it."

Made in Florida.

SPAWN OF THE SLITHIS

Stephen Traxler (1977)
Sex interview with Stephen Traxler

Made in California.

THE SPECTRE OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Moby Juundour (1972)
aka *Lenore*

A story for those who think writers must do what they write in order to create, this could still have been fun if it didn't get lost in an excess of wandering around in dimly-lit interiors. Poe's famous poem *The Raven*, and his stories *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Premature Burial* and *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether* are revealed here not as the phantasies of a creative mind, but simply as events that actually befall the beleaguered writer over a mere couple of months!

When his sweetheart Lenore (Mary Grover) is stricken dead with a malady just as she is swooning into his arms, Edgar Allan Poe (Robert Walker Jr) is inconsolable. At the funeral, he throws himself in anguish into the grave, thus hearing faint cries from inside the coffin. Rescued from her premature burial, Lenore now with her bare and haggard face sinks into a deep catatonic slumber. Dr Forrest (Tom Drake), a friend of Poe's, recommends a rest home for her, but Dr Grimaldi (Cesar Romero), the head of the establishment, is up to no good, using patients for despicable experiments. When Poe explores the hospital deep in the night, he finds a cell, and within, a murdered prisoner. He tries to raise the alarm, but he is overpowered and drugged. He awakes to find a dank pit, strapped to a wooden board floating in filthy water that writhes with snakes. An overhead pipe gushes water into the chamber, flooding the board higher and higher, although to what end the film leaves uncertain. Juundour here choosing to swap Poe's ambiguity about what wriggles in the water for uncertainty about what awaits at the top. Drugged again, Poe is set loose (Cue knows why) and tells his friend what happened. Despite the doctor's attempt to pass it all off as a drunken hallucination, further investigations by Poe and his friend reveal the awful truth.

It is at least amusing to think that had the film made money and found an audience, there could have been a slew of sequels, all of them sagging elements from Poe's fantastical stories as

chance pseudo-biographical simulacra. Perhaps *The Fury of Edgar Allan Poe* (comprising *The Black Cat*, *Berenice* and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*), would have made a good sequel! Sadly, Juundour's direction sinks the project and the script fails to assign anything like a truly compelling character to Poe himself, who is played by Robert Walker as a slightly peeved-looking nobleman.

Made in: unknown

SUMMA

David Durston (1972)
see *interview with David Durston*

Made in: Massachusetts

THE STRANGENESS

David Michael (1980)
see *interview with Mark Schwick*

Made in: California

SUICIDE CULT

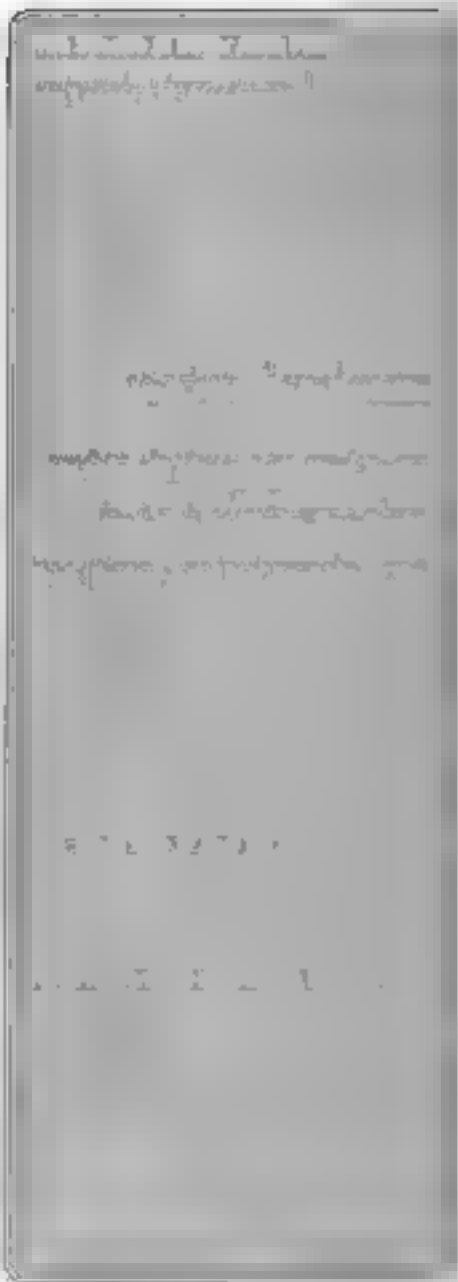
James Chickenhaut (1977)
aka *The Astrologer*

Suicide Cult is a bizarre story with an expensive appearance that betrays its low-budget origins. Made by James Chickenhaut, who would score a solid B-movie hit in 1980 with his vigilante flick *The Exterminator*, it's a very odd piece of work about a secret government research organisation studying the astrological charts of prominent figures, looking for those with the 'Zodiac Potential' for either great good, or great evil. A crackpot premise at first glance, for sure, but if you shake your scepticism you've got to admit it's different.

The plot concerns the efforts of Astrological Super-Spy Alexei 'Hornet' (Bob Byrd) to guide a young woman, Kate (Monica Tidwell), a New Jersey dance instructor, to her cosmic destiny. His technique is to marry her and thus protect her, since she is believed to have the purest Zodiac Potential since The Virgin Mary – which is nice, because it seems that Kate may be about to give birth to the Second Coming of Jesus. But while the forces of good are gathering around Kate, across the globe Evil is preparing its attack. An Indian cult leader called Kajerste (Mark Zuntzman), a dangerous magician with an almost limitless capacity for evil, is seeking the purest women on Earth in order to destroy them, and corrupt the universal balance.

Sadly enough, this had the potential, Zodiacal or otherwise, to be a really good movie. But there's something not quite right about *Suicide Cult*, it's as if it's been hurriedly assembled from an incomplete shooting schedule, with huge cracks papered over. The editor receives first mention on the end credits, which suggests a troubled production snatched from the brink of collapse, perhaps at the urging of a desperate producer determined to get at least *something* onto the market. The ending especially is a jolt, no doubt betraying where the bulk of the unfinished material belongs. The story, based on a 1972 mass-market pot-boiler called *The Astrologer* by John Cameron, progresses through ellipse after ellipse, changing location between America, India and England, with each shift signified by solarised effects (another hint that the film was hard to edit). Within the weirdness, though, are a couple of surprisingly convincing performances. Mark Zuntzman as Kajerste lives up to the hype by fairly blazing from the screen, playing a sort of Indian Charlie Manson. The scene where he is to sacrifice a female spy assigned to plant suicidal impulses in his dreams (the film is nothing if not ambitious) could have floundered – the villain has been campy or exaggerated. Instead he gives the sequence a truly malevolent energy.

There's a philosophical angle to the film's astrological mysticism, which, although it might seek in the throw of dice based on the notion that all men are created equal, at least offers



The UK video cover for *The Spectre of Edgar Allan Poe*. The film was also released by VHS with the same cover.

The *Astrologer* the VHS cover for *Suicide Cult* aka *The Astrologer*.



an accurate summary of *one* view in the occult 'fraternity' that the human race is radically divided between drones and visionaries. As you would expect, those who adhere to this view tend to speak from an assumed position in the latter camp, but there are similarities between this point of view and the aristocratic mercenariness of Nietzsche. However, dig deeper into books like Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and you'll find room for manoeuvre. Instead of the fixed cosmological constants of high and low espoused in *Suicide Cult*, the philosopher proposed the Superman as the next stage in humanity's development. The mission of Man was to be undertaken in the spirit of the individual, and was certainly not the province of some pre-existing oligarchy. *Suicide Cult* has a fascist notion at its core: 'some people are just destined to rule', but at least it proposes the idea in a way that alerts us to the sad fantasies inherent in such dreams of an over-race.

Philosophy aside, in the post-*X-Files* media environment this is a film whose theme could easily be revisited. Like all shady covert operations, the government astrologers in *Suicide Cult* are liars and cheats, so there's plenty here in grip conspiracy theories, or at least to amuse devotees of *Fortune Teller*. For instance, a well-constructed sequence shows how an unsuspecting congressman is hoodwinked into supporting the agency by the creation of ominous 'accidents'. If Oliver Stone remade *Vigil of the Demon*.

Despite its manifest flaws, *Suicide Cult* belongs in the same oddball company as Larry Cohen's *Goat Soda Me To* and Jeff Lieberman's *Blue Sunshine*. What it lacks in coherence it gains in ambition and the nerve to be different, and I'm surprised it has not been cheered or defended before. For all its garbled, unfinished quality and its half-digested ideas, it feels like the work of someone to watch.

Gluckenklaus was born 24 July 1950, in New York. He co-owned the production company Shapiro-Gluckenklaus. Since this debut, he has made *The Exterminator* (1980), *Lawman: The Soldier* (1982), *The Protector* (1985), *Shakedown* (1989), *At Bay* (1991), *Slaughter of the Innocents* (1993), and *Foremaster* (1995).

Made in: unknown

SWINGERS MASSACRE

Ron Garcia (1973)

aka *Friday Amy*

I was looking forward to this luridly titled obscenity-made-back-to-back with Don Jones's *Abominable*. Garcia's sex film *The Toy Box* was weird, if a little tedious, but this rather more conventional murder tale seemed to propose a fusion of *The Toy Box*'s sleaziness with the narrative demands of the horror genre. Said to say despite two salacious titles promising all sorts of sleazy mayhem, *Swingers Massacre* fumbles the chance, stooping to a crime without ever getting its face in the gutter.

Lawyer Charlie Tishman (Eastman Price) petitions his rebarren wife Amy (Jan Mitchell) to join him on the swingers scene in a bid to even up their love life. He finally succeeds in browbeating her to attend a swingers party, only to freak out when she actually digs it.

What's more, Charlie is a wash-out with the other women, failing to get it up despite numerous opportunities. One of the other husbands waves a vibrator at him, suggesting he buy one. "Amy'll love it!" Charlie tries to take his humiliation out on his wife ("You need an army! No wonder I can't keep you satisfied. I guess I should consider myself lucky you're even coming home with me.") but having unleashed her pent-up desires, Amy is not about to let Charlie spoil her fun – especially since he's being so mean and hypocritical. Unable to face the situation he's created, Charlie murders all the men his wife has slept with: Jim (Gary Kent), Bill (Ron Darby) and Rod (Paul Oberon). Allowing himself to be talked into another swinging party, this time with Jerry (Philip Luther) and Donna (Ann Perry), Charlie spends the evening drunkenly talking about his work, until Amy goes off without him for a bisexual romp with their hosts. Charlie drugs them up, strangles Jerry, hangs Donna, and carries his wife back home unconscious. As a police investigation belatedly closes in on the Tishmans, Amy must confront her crazed husband alone.

Swingers looks like a decent little thriller from the synopsis. But just as you think the story is settling down to a depiction of chaotic, toxic jealousy, Garcia – reportedly working from a script penned by the producer's wife – has the gall to tell the tale as if Charlie's attitude should be respected. A song that's played over Amy having sex with Jim warns her to return to the marital fold or face the consequences. It's worth quoting at length for its breathtaking hypocrisy: "Who knows what goes on inside Amy? How did she get to be this way? Breaking the heart of one who loves her/And giving not a damn about the price she'll have to pay/Amy, you'd better straighten out or be prepared to meet your fate/Come back to what you were before. It's too late."



Men who propose open relationships often seem to have it enough only as far as visualising themselves in bed with her woman: the possibility that their wives may get a taste for men is far less palatable. One could argue that the song's lyrics are meant to represent Charlie's viewpoint, as he sits there, glass of whiskey in hand, watching his wife make out on the rug with hunky Kent, but the vocalist is a woman, the song is a syrupy lament and there is no sense of jealous intensity to the music. The scene almost more like a directorial flourish, expressing an omniscient sentiment. Quite how anyone can film a story in which the male is instantly the agent of his own misfortune, then turn around and blame the woman for bringing disaster, is beyond me.

There are a few aim-lights here to James Bryan's *The Distant in the World*, but Bryan made his failed swinger *Enigma* a genuinely tragic figure, and when she erupts into violence it's aimed against herself. Charlie never shows a glimmer of self-recognition and no one gets to tell him what a selfish hypocrite he is. If Charlie had ended his murder spree by killing himself, his selfish might at least have tempted us to extend some sympathy. We're obviously meant to see him as disturbed and damaged, but instead of focusing on how Charlie's lack of self-understanding is led him to murder, the film climaxes with Amy terrified by her husband and facing the wages of her sin.

I hate this sort of moralistic banish in exploitation movies, especially when the film lacks the potent spectacle to offset its banality. On top of which, the film is overlong at around a hundred minutes, and could easily have been cut by twenty. For a start, there's way too much dancing, wrangling and schmoozing at a dimly-lit nightclub in the first half-hour (the famous 'Fiddy McNasty's on Sunset Strip, Hollywood), which slows the pace to a crawl; by the time we arrive at the crime climaxes that constitute Amy's awakening, nothing short of a donkey-show could liven things up.

The original title of the film was *Inside Love*, and you might suspect that a more pornographic cut was released under that name, and then shorn of its shagging for the 1987 video release (which is where the title *Swingers Massacre* originates). This seems unlikely though – if you added hardcore sex scenes to *Swingers Massacre*, the running time would soar over the two-hour mark with ease. The suggestion that swingers are destined for a life of misery ending in humiliation or painful death is particularly sanctimonious given that the original title was such a porno-scene. With murders that aren't explicit, sex scenes that are graphic, and a preachy ending showing another young couple going to 'swing' into the marital quicksand, this is one exploitation flick that can find no reason to recommend.

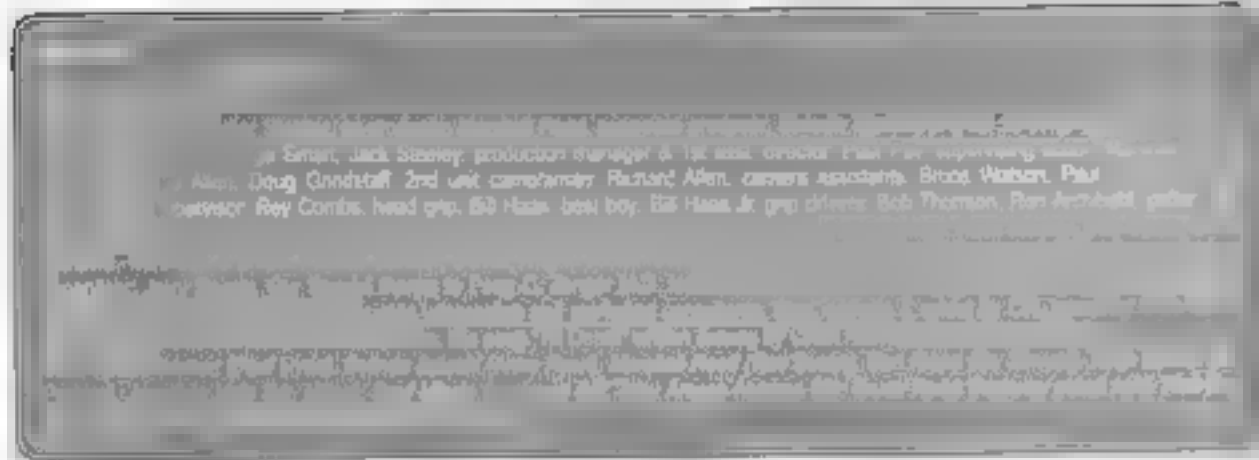
Video in California.

TILL DEATH

Walter Stocker (1974)

On the eve of his wedding to Anne (Belinda Balasko), Paul (Keith Atkinson) has a nightmare in which he is attacked by a dead woman in a graveyard. Next day, the wedding progresses without incident, but en-route to their honeymoon Paul sees the woman of his nightmare again; terrified, he drives his car off a cliff, killing himself in the process. Months later, checking out of the hospital where he's been sequestered for depression, Paul visits his wife's tomb and is accidentally locked in overnight. As midnight looms, he hears his wife's voice begging him to get her out of her coffin. Smacking the tomb with a pickaxe left behind by workmen, he discovers Anne is still alive, having woken from a catatonic sleep. Happily, he tells her of all the places they can visit once help arrives in the morning. But as night ebbs away, Anne reveals there's only one way they can truly be together.

Till Death is a clumsy but fairly competent tale of love beyond the grave, the sort of thing that in the hands of Mario Bava or Jean Rollin would have made the grade as a necrophiliac poem, but in Stocker's hands ends up as down-laden dreggeret. Rollin's *La mort de fer* for instance, spins a similar tale of lovers locked in a tomb overnight, but imbues the theme with such melancholy



dreaminess that dialogue is hardly necessary. Still, recovering from a bland first reel depicting the sappy relationship between Paul and his bride, things begin to improve with the appearance of Mr. Hilton (Jonathan Hyde), the sinister camp master of the cemetery where Anne is buried. "Life is death, death is life," he tries. Thank goodness for his arch performance, it livenes the film up a bit and signals the start of better things. Proud of giving Paul the guided tour of his beloved cemetery, Hilton is as philosophical as he points out a new grave. "Such a beautiful woman, she is so young. The minutes of freshly turned earth will bring her back to the heart of Mother Earth. And then we all spring."

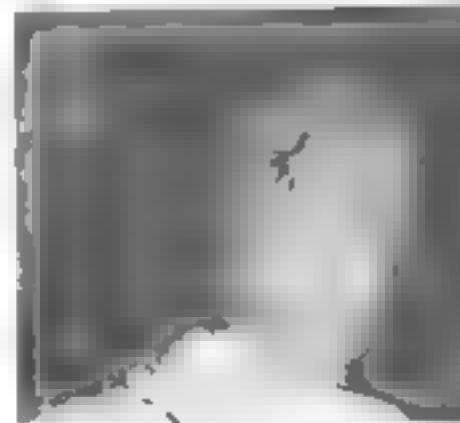
A potentially effective scene in the mausoleum, as Paul digs his wife from her tomb, demands aesthetic imagination and a touch of class, but Stocker's approach is resolutely sensible. Sure the tomb interiors are lit with coloured gels, but the effect is more Quinn-Marion than Antonio Margheriti, whose *Castle of Blood* (a young man trapped in a haunted mansion who falls in love with a ghost) provides another Euro-parallel. Unfortunately, the stubbornly static camera and Belinda Balasko's emotional (or Belasco's performance fail to milk the Gothic potential. Emerging from the tomb, Anne is violent and frenky for a while, but she soon calms down and we're back to the tedious Mrs. W. episode of earlier. Perhaps Balasko was unhappy with the production.

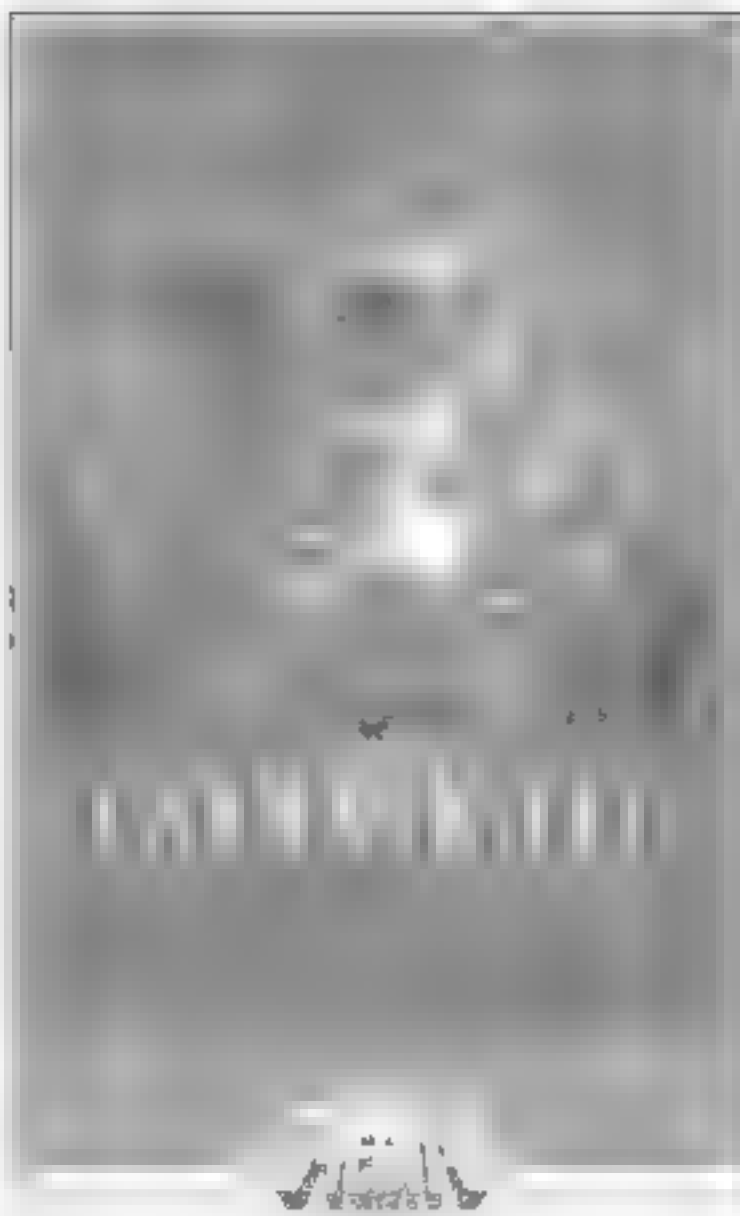
What is Paul's Terrifying Secret?
Till Death as re

IS video cover
Massacre Was the
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Can the fates of a New York
nstructor and a Manonnesque local
linked? Two images from Suicide Club

Paul, Anne and
with the





"If you can just open your heart to the book of life, you can behold the spirit of death, timeless, beautiful," says Anne to Paul. You've never talked this way before, what's the matter with you?" is her staggeringly, slopily response. *Till Death* suffers from the same lack of sensitivity. Paul's journey from rational day to supernatural night lacks any sort of back-up from the director, the camera or the editing. The sole exception is the score, which although crude does occasionally spark a feeling of otherworldly tension. At the core of the problem is the scene where the reanimated Anne begs Paul to make love to her before dawn. Paul refuses; he points to the sepulchral surroundings and asks her if she's crazy. And yet the whole film is about the yearning desire the bereaved feel for departed lovers. In European horror films (what love beyond the grave (and there are many), Paul's lack of passion would crump the style of the whole enterprise. *Till Death* could have focused on the unfulfilled desire and humor of the lead character, with the two feelings shuffling into each other. Mario Bava's *Lisa and the Devil* (1973) is a perfect example: a film where sex with the dead is not merely a twist but a swooningly erotic centerpiece. The best that Siodmak and his cameramen George Smart and Jack Steeles can offer is to let the bare bones of writer Gregory Hanna's story ensue, but the camera observes the necessary speech and actions without ever *amplifying* the theme. There's an emotional and sensual potential here staring the filmmaker in the face, but like Paul mystified by his dead wife's delirium, the director just doesn't get it.

Siodmak was born 1 September, 1925, in Philadelphia PA, and died 5 December, 2003, in Port Aransas CA. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Miami, a master's degree from Columbia University (taught college in North Carolina and Virginia, and served in World War II in the Army Air Corps. His only other genre credit was as an actor in *Three Sacred Nights* directed by David Bradley, 1963.

Made in: unknown

TO ALL A GOODNIGHT

David Hess (1980)

It's the Christmas holidays at Calvin College Finishing School for girls. A group of students arrange a private farewell party adding a sleeping draught to the night-time milk of their house mother Mrs. Jensen (Katherine Herringford), and inviting some boys to stay the night. But there's a killer stalking the college, dressed as Santa Claus. So who's been naughty and who's been nice? Only sweet virginity Nancy (Jennifer Runyon) is in with a chance of surviving, that is, unless she succumbs to the ardor of super-nerd Alex (Famey Swanson). With darkness closing in, one question remains: "how many deaths will we get to see in the murky day-for-night photography?"

Yes, it's cookie-cutter time again. A "two years earlier" prologue, clumsy synth score, lousy performances, a creepy old gardener...no doubt about it. *To All a Goodnight* sets up its stall at the cheap end of Slusherville. The end-of-term Christmas Sorority House setting is pilfered wholesale from Bob Clark's superior *Black Christmas*, and much of what passes for a denouement is nicked from *Friday the 13th*. To be fair, the killer Santa arrives with an advance of the better-known *Silent Night, Death Night* (1984), and may even have pre-dated Lewis Jackson's *Christmas Evil* (made the same year). But originality is not the major consideration: visceral kicks are what matter. Sad to say, actor-turned-director David Hess - who gave us one of the screen's most electrifying killers as Krug in *The Last House on the Left* - fails to bring his personal intensity as a performer to his role behind the camera.

With expectations aside, you can still get your jollies laughing at howlers in the script: from "Bliss whoever built that airstrip when help arrives, to "I think I'll go get a Kleenex" as a prelude to getting killed. A kitchen floor smeared with blood is dismissed with a curl: "Ralph probably cut himself with the shears" - and best of all, after Ralph is found dead and two more of the party disappear, someone says: "Just because we saw Ralph got himself murdered doesn't mean anything's happened to the others." Top class rubbish that dear old Ed Wood might have dreamed up, if he'd ever turned his hand to the slasher genre.

As for the violence, though, it certainly isn't what you'd expect from the man who carved his name into a screaming girl's throat in *The Last House on the Left*. The killings are okay, but they don't make the A list: there's a crossbow bolt through the back of the head, a decapitation by axe, a severed head screwed onto a shower fitting, and sundry slashings and skull-bashings. There's even a double death by airplane propeller, but we don't see it directly, just a splash of gore onto the fuselage.

Bearing in mind its provenance, *To All a Goodnight* ought to have attracted the opposition, but it turns out to require a completist's devotion. If you're a lover of formulaic back-and-slash movies, you'll probably get a mild kick out of this, just the once, but return visits are unlikely.

Made in: California

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MURDERS

Johns (1974)

So, how does an L.A. producer in disco-land 1977 come to make a killing with a weird little film like *The Texas Chain Saw Murders* three long years before Paramount Studios sniffed the glove and snapped up *Friday the 13th*? Well, jolly producer Tony DiDia noticed that *The Texas Chain Saw Murders* was back in theatres enjoying a second bite of the cherry in 1977. As he knew *Chain Saw*'s distributors, he asked them how come the film was being re-released so soon. Low-budget horror, even second-hand-round, is money in the bank, they explained, so DiDia put out feelers for a writer and director who could deliver another graphically violent cash-cow. He arranged a screening of *Chain Saw* for writers Robert Foster and Ann Kuehberg, and young TV director Dennis O'Connell, telling them to come up with something that would compete in the graphic horror market. The result is certainly violent, although *Texas* couldn't be more different to *Chain Saw*.

hteen days in the summer of 1977 for \$165,000 in Sherman Way and Van Cleave Street, Los Angeles, *The Toolbox Murders* is quintessential exploitation, with a first act that delivers a explicit jolt. The image of a bandaged-clad killer hefting a toolbox has an archetypal quality, ripped dripping-red from collective psyche. If we've never actually read about a killer using a toolbox to kill, we feel as if we have. The scenes echo Ted Bundy as the killer tours an apartment block with a variety of murder weapons: hammer, screwdriver, prefiguring the creative-killing mayhem of the *Friday the 13th* series. *The Toolbox Murders*, with its trashy and vicious advertisements, could have been the ultimate urban horror flick — except for a third act that slows the pace to a crawl. The toolbox business takes place in the first act, leaving, shall we say, the more picturesque aspects of the film to drag on and on. Cameron Mitchell is his head to play his society unerringly, singing, sucking a thong, busting, humping it up and no doubt having a whole of a one. If you're a fan of this grizzled exploitation veteran, you'll be enthralled. For everyone else, it's like having a drunken relative celebrate the party.

criticisms and censors have always found the movie's entire nail-gun scene deeply problematic, and it's not so surprising. More so than any other slasher scene I can think of, it combines with bare female nudity and lurid gore violence in a very uneasy way. Future porn star Marianne Walter (aka Kelly Nichols) is shown masturbating in the bath as the camera peers at her body-covered boobs. Thanks partially to the actress's performance and partially to the style of filming, the scene feels drafted in from a teenage porno movie. Then, on cue with her orgasm, as if to witness her pleasure, the killer enters and stalks the naked woman through her apartment, slung a nail-gun. He corners the girl in her bedroom where she kneels nude on the bed, pleading for her life, cowering in acquiescence. The camera simply eyes at this, and the scene's jazz-mag cheesiness, when dropped into such a brutal context, can give even hardened exploitation/horror viewers pause. Although on closer inspection the victim has chosen to assume the seductive position on the bed as a desperate ploy to persuade the assailant not to kill her. As the soundtrack coldly contrasts the horror with a country ballad on the radio — *Pretty much Fair in Love with You* — it will come as no surprise to anyone that the nails eventually hit their target, leaving the viewer to mull over one of the nastiest and sleaziest slayings in the genre.

Associate producer Jack Kindberg, father of the film's co-writer, went on to become President of Studio Operations and Administration at Sony Pictures Entertainment, thanks to the intervention of Tony Di Dio, who first interested him in acquiring a studio property back in the 1980s. Actress Pamela Berlin voiced the brutish Lucy Van Helsing as *Charlie Brown*.

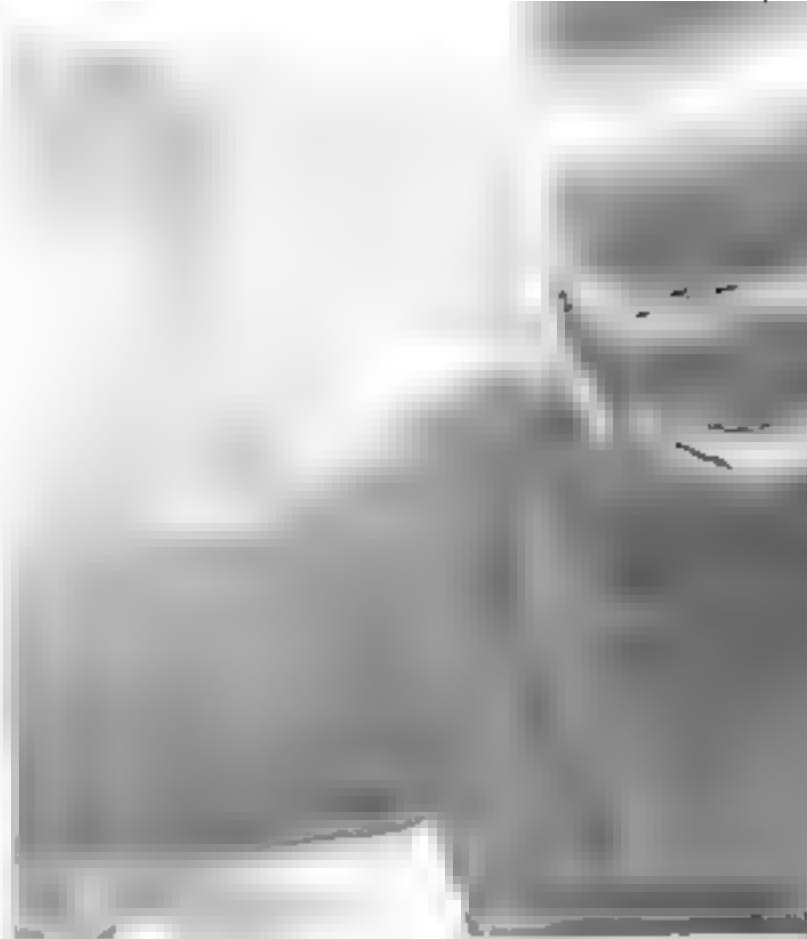
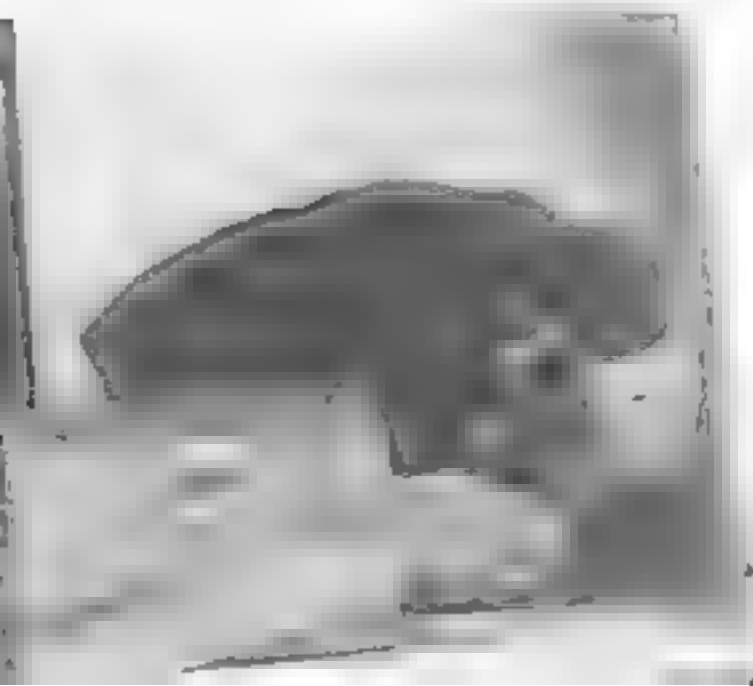
Made in California.

VICTIMS

Janie (DiSanto, 1977)

Interview with Janie DiSanto.

Made in California.



WHO KNEW

John Williamson (Nau, 1982)

aka *Lucifer in Blood*

aka *Savage Affair* (Australian video title)

This internationally eccentric slasher tale has been largely ignored by fans. I wouldn't say I was waving a flag for it, but it's

A group of actors and filmmakers go to a remote island to make a movie. The director and producer, intending to rehearse a rock musical (but

there's no chemistry between the cast, the lead actress is bipolar, the caterer is a grumpy psychotic, and the rock musicians who've been drafted in to help are a bunch of callous assholes. Perhaps it's just as well that a killer is stalking the island.

The first thing to mention here is that Williamson is drumming tirelessly on an acoustic guitar when you're setting up the plot of your movie. *Whodunnit?* does so, and you can feel the energy draining out of the film and nudging on the carpet. It also helps if you can decide what you're trying to achieve, and Williamson can't.

Williamson explains to his cast that they're doing something serious, a redeeming, a rock musical about kids putting on a show for charity. The contrast between his cheesy project and the nasty horror film we're actually watching might have generated a bit of tension, but *Whodunnit?* makes the trick. *These are up, up people*, says the director about his characters, but apart from calling him Frankan Platem (I'm not sure, but I think that's a satire), Williamson has to have much to do with the premise. It's a shame because the notion of a janky showbiz escape being slaughtered by a maniac has lots of potential — something Italian director Michele Soavi proved in his enjoyable debut.

As a result of its fluffed comedy, *Whodunnit?* is extremely unsteady on its feet in the first twenty minutes — the attempt to satirize bad filmmaking is maybe a tad ambitious for a movie that can barely get out of the startline gate. As if realizing he's barking up the wrong tree, Nau abandons satire after the first reel, as the film concentrates on the sinister task of murdering its victims.

We arrive in slasher-land with a flourish that ought to be exorcising but actually helps to fix the movie in your mind: each killing is accompanied by a tape-recorded punk song (well, punk as in *The Knock of The Dicks*, at least), the choruses of which vary to match each demise. *And me, Brim me* (not a victim) plunges into a superheated swimming pool, *Spear Me, Spear*



top right and bottom left
One of the screen's nastiest murderers on his trade in *The Toolbox Murders*



above top left: The victim in *Whodunnit?* can't see the knife any longer



above middle left: *Whodunnit?* came from the Sea



Me!" for an impalement, "Saw Me Saw Me" for... well, you get the idea. The rest of the score is by Joel Goldsmith, and it bears a distinct similarity to his music for the classic Steve Martin movie *The Man with Two Brains*, made a couple of years later.

The murders are sometimes impressive, my favourite being the one where the killer pipes battery acid into a shower-cubicle giving a luckless bother a serious skin problem. However, the film's biggest flaw is that it fails to show *all* the killings direct. Once you've showered a naked girl with battery acid, what else can you possibly be afraid of showing? If every murder in *Whodunnit?* was as grotesque and unpleasant as the acid scene, it would gladden the heart of slasher-fans everywhere. As it is, a nail-gun attack is promised ("Nail Me Nail Me") but we only hear the nails going in. Sure, we see the bloody aftermath, but it's not quite the same, is it?

Whodunnit?'s characters range from idle cynics to out-and-out morons, interspersed with a few mild and mediocre girls, a forgettable hunk, and a Central Casting nerd (who at least made me laugh when he brandished a lit candle at the suspected killer saying "Stay away, or I'll burn you!") This lack of sympathetic characters doesn't have to be a problem, but a bit more detail would have helped. One of the script's best ideas is to make everyone so selfish and cynical that they all suspect each other (this could easily have been the saving grace of the film, but in the end the honour goes to that song, that damn song, which guarantee will be stuck in your mind's ear for days. And the runner-up, the not-quite-saving grace? Well, there's a final twist, one that it would be tough to reveal, which at least explains why the actors were so bad in those early scenes.

Whodunnit? was filmed at Dana Point, Orange County, CA, and Paradise Cove, Los Angeles County. Richard D'Andrea, who wrote "Face to Face" (the song that echoes the murders), was an ex-member of The Minels and The Know, the latter of which he formed with Blindie member Gary Valentine in 1978. By 1980, after gigging extensively without scoring a deal, D'Andrea disbanded the group. His song on the film is credited to a group called Factor Four, but I've been unable to discover any more about them.

Made in California.

THE WITCH WHO CAME FROM THE SEA

Matt Cimber (1976)

Before this, the only Matt Cimber film I'd seen was *Butterfly*, so imagine my surprise when *The Witch Who Came from the Sea* turned out to be one of the strangest and most perversely beautiful horror films of the seventies. It's a beginning fantasy with a unique texture well beyond the more workday levels of the genre, the sort of movie you can watch several times and still remain unsure of the exact contents. Not because it's bad, or boring, but because the hazy, downbeat style twists your mind out of focus. Cimber saturates his tale with an off-season seaside ambience, which blended with the lead character's dreamy psychopathy, produces something extraordinary.

Molly (Mille Perkins) lives near Santa Monica beach with her older sister Cathy (Vanessa Brown). She looks after Todd (Jean Pierre Camps) and Tripoli (Mark Livingston), Cathy's children. The boys' father has left home, and Molly has become their friend and chaperone. Although well-liked at The Boardhouse, the waterfront bar where she works for Long John (Lonny Chapman) and Doris (Peggy Peury), Molly exhibits some unsettling character traits. A fantasist obsessed with her absent father, whom she claims was lost at sea, she bitterly resents Cathy's dismissal of him as a no-good drunk. Meanwhile, Molly's relationships with men veer between adoration and rage, a conflict that soon turns to violence.

There's no point skirting the central theme of this film merely to avoid spoilers, as the viewer will suspect the truth very quickly. The flashbacks revealing that Molly was abused by her father are nothing like a twist: we can tell from her fervent declarations of love that his wickedness has scarred her deeply. *Witch* is devoid of suspense and fails to quite as a mystery. Instead, it's the acting – a way the tale is told, that makes it special.

Mille Perkins's performance as Molly achieves a clarity that reaches into your mind and seriously creeps you out. She's amazing. I would put her performance on a par with Susanah York in *Images* and Carrie Kacie in *The Mafia Cage*. Her strained, gaunt face conveys Molly's dual life perfectly. We can see that the tide of her fantasies will never wash away her trauma.

Of course this is a horror film, not simply a psychological portrait, what's more, it's a horror film that found its way onto the banned list in the UK back in 1984. So what makes *The Witch Who Came from the Sea* so shocking and objectionable? I suppose it comes down to the c-word. No, not that one (although it does spring from the lips of a couple of unpleasant male characters). I mean c as in castration. "Don't say that word!" begs Woody Allen in *Bananas*, and he's right. For most men, the syllables themselves are enough to set the nerves on edge. Molly reduces two hulking American Football players, one white, one black, to a threesome, but this is to be no Premier-league 'spit-roasting' session. After the men have smoked some powerful grass, Molly languidly lies their wrists and ankles to the bed. The black player is so stoned he falls asleep at this point, leaving his team-mate to fend off Molly with just one leg untied. To his avail: Molly gags him, then emerges from the bathroom with a razorblade, before moving between his legs for a long, leisurely hack-and-slash session.

Culp, Cimber has sprung this horrorshow on his audience quite suddenly, so suddenly, in fact, that for a while we think it may all have been Molly's fantasy, just as earlier, while watching two musclemen working out on the beach, she daydreamed they were strung up and lured from their exercise apparatus. The castration sequence, heavily reverbed in a way that suggests either druggy dislocation or fantasy, is wedged into the middle of a scene in which Molly argues with her sister. After the footballers have been, shall we say 'relegated', we return to the same argument, as if the castration scene in its entirety happened somewhere out of time. It's only later, when Molly is with Long John at the bar, that a news report confirms the reality.

Motifs relating to Molly's fantasy life are subtle and well integrated: for instance, her obsessional belief that her father sailed out to sea and never returned makes sense when, in flashback, we're shown the painting of a sailing ship hung above the child's bed. Her fantasies of daddy disappearing into the ocean are excited in the child's attempt to shut out rape by staring into the painting. Her obsession with mermaids, women of the sea, takes on extra significance after a discussion at a party. Staring, mply at a reproduction of Botticelli's *Venus*, she enquires as to the meaning of the picture. The host, McPeak (StuFord Margan) tells her that Venus was born when her father (Ouranos) was castrated (by his son, Spurn) and his testicles thrown in the ocean, from whence they generated the sea. (Amusingly, the predatory but shallow McPeak tells Molly that he learned this nugget of mythology from his chauffeur.) Molly later muses on the nature of mermaids, recounting the notion that mermaids' tails were split in two to make legs. This image, of the rending of the



mermaid's wholeness to create a woman, mirrors Molly's fate at the hands of her father, a child torn open and forced into sexual knowledge. When Molly has a tattoo of a mermaid inscribed on her stomach, she insists to the tattooist that he be careful to get the placement just right, the fins not too close to her groin, underlining the symbolism of unwanted maidenhood. The mermaid is, "An Eve figure overlaid with the cult of the Virgin, a sealed vessel enclosing either sexual temptation or sexual virtue, a some paradoxical and potent mixture of the two," as Carol Shields puts it in her book *The Republic of Love*. In Molly's mind these myths entangle, until they seem to demand that the birth of a mermaid requires the castration of the father. Later, when Molly kills and castrates Mr. Penk, she massages her breasts with his blood; her mermaid tattoo is visible underneath. With wonderful economy, she later explains the bloodstains to Long John as being from the tattoo itself.

To keep castration in our thoughts throughout the film, the script employs an ever-recurring theme of razors and shaving. Molly sees a TV commercial featuring a male model having a shave and espousing the wonders of the blade. The razor kills her father after the first of these TV commercials ("Turn on your television and find out what's happening in the real world," she says at one point). The link between TV and murder isn't casual; everything seems to fit together in Molly's head: images from the beach, images from TV, her own vengeful fantasies, all approaching a sinister confluence that leads inexorably to the razor-killing. "A razor can strike at any time, but it always seems to come at the wrong moment," says a TV commercial, after Molly has hallucinated the man in the razor advert urging her to slice him from his throat to "the parts that you want".

With the exception of Long John and the two boys, men are depicted unflatteringly. The footballers are usually just laid-back jocks indulging the unthinking arrogance of their breed. It's when Molly strays from the script of their threesome that one of them uses the other 'a' word, exposing a little misogyny behind the casual chauvinism. Billy Batt (Rick Jason), a set obsessed actor, uses the 'c' word too, in a way that underlines his nasty streak. One of the film's most powerful scenes is Molly's attack on Batt

in his bedroom, during a party seduction that goes awry. Provoked by a stray remark, she hurls herself at him, attempting to bite his penis and then breaking the bones in his hand. After a brief exchange during which Batt realises that Molly is quite insane, there's another clumsy, agonised scuffle at the door of the bedroom, which propels Molly into a living room packed with media and showbiz hangers-on. Batt wounds in the doorway, nursing his bleeding hand, while Molly slumps silently to the carpet. To the guests, it looks as if Batt has assaulted her. However, instead of explaining the truth, he withdraws back to his bedroom, fully aware of the misunderstanding but preferring to be seen as a bully rather than a victim.

Molly tries to avoid saying anything that will damage Todd and Tripoli's perception of their role models – the footballers she has idolised. Something of her 'innocence' is preserved by this circumspection, which is obviously intended to maintain our sympathy for the character – one of the few heavy-handed touches in the film. But sympathily or otherwise, Molly's self-deception is not without price in the lives of those she cherishes. In a chilling scene, Todd and Tripoli react with venom when their mother says Molly is a killer. Molly's self-deception has caused a ripple; just as she was unable to face the truth about her wicked father, now the boys are unable to countenance the truth about her. As they stare coldly at their sibling mother, we see in their hatred the negative impact of Molly's fantasies.

The ending has an anti-authoritarian slant. Doris and Long John (a pirate, says Molly, *he knows*) give the murderers a final, loving send-off without alerting the police, even though they know what she has done. Together with the boys, they form a surrogate family around her, enveloping her scenes with a romantic band of outsiders' fantasy. Camber aligns himself with them: the last shot, taking Long John's point of view, looks up at the approaching police through the faux-porthole of the bathroom door.

The Witch Who Came from the Sea feels hewn from late night conversations, private reminiscences, it drifts and drifts like seaweed, like thoughts in a cannabix smoke. The structural timber of the horror genre is cast adrift. Before over horror at least is concentrated in the early part of the film, and what follows is a slow, sleepy tidal shift into psychological portraiture. Imagery and allusion are appermost in the latter half, and a first late-night viewing of the film may yield nothing but humming after except a few images and a morbid afterglow. The movie changes the metabolism of its genre: the scares are oblique, the overall tone languid. Matt Chamberlain decided, four or five years later, when his Pin Zadora vehicle *Butterfly* hit the screen. I rather enjoyed that one too, but *The Witch Who Came from the Sea* is in another league: a genre masterpiece deserving of a much higher profile.

Matt Chamberlain's first film *Single Room Furnished* starred his then wife Jayne Mansfield in a rare serious role (she plays three stages of the same character). Mansfield died before the film could be completed; on 29 June, 1961, Chamberlain completed it with footage featuring the supporting cast. *Witch* was shot by Dean Cundley and written by the writer-director of *Angel, Angel Down the Co.* Robert Thom, who died in 1979. On the production side, the producer Jefferson Richard, who worked on several Chamberlain films including *The Black 6* and *The Candy Tangerine Man*, was production supervisor on *Isa, Harlem Keeper of the Oil Sherk*, co-producer of *Murder Cop* and the writer-director of *Berserker* (1987). M. B. Perkins, the lead actress, went on to a varied career, appearing in a genre in 1994 to appear in the Brian Yuzna film *The Lovecraft Anthology Film Necronomicon*. The cop is played by George Buck Flower, who's appeared in several John Carpenter films including *The Fog* and *They Live*. He was also, like fellow cast-member Stafford Morgan, in Bill Robinson's *The Aqua Incident* (1977) – Flower played the railway guard and Morgan was Dr. Sorensen, the government man. Flower also played Binz, the sleazy ingratiating doctor in charge of medical experiments in *Isa, She Wolf of the SS*.

Made in California.

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Stephen Thrower is the author of *Beyond Terror: The Films of Lucio Fulci*, and the editor of *The Eyeball Compendium* (both published by FAB Press). He has also contributed to *Art of Darkness: The Cinema of Dario Argento* (ed. Chris Gallant) and *Ten Years of Terror: British Horror Films of the 1970s* (eds. Harvey Fenton & David Flint), both of which are also published by FAB Press, plus *The BFI Companion to Horror* (ed. Kim Newman), *No Focus: Punk on Film* (eds. Chris Barber & Jack Sargeant), and *Horror: The Definitive Guide to the Cinema of Fear* (eds. James Murrill & Kim Newman). He also works as a musician, being one half of the electronic duo *Cyclode* and a member of the improvisational rock group *The Anal Gamal Ensemble*.





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